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**Assessing writing through reflection: A qualitative inquiry**

by

Eden F. Pearson

A dissertation submitted to the graduate faculty  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Major: Education (Educational Leadership)

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Ames, Iowa

2007

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**DEDICATION**

To my husband,

Mark,

and my children:

Mike, Katie, Betsy, and Ellie.

Thank you.

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**ABSTRACT**

Writing is a challenge to teach and difficult to assess. However, in this era of accountability, college-level writing must be assessed. The problem addressed in this case study was whether the writing ability of community college students could be authentically assessed. The purpose of this study was to seek to understand the nature of reflection in writing assessment. The experiences of first-year composition instructors, first-year composition students, and trained portfolio readers who participated in a new, holistically-scored portfolio course evaluation program at an urban, Midwestern community college were explored. The assessment required first-year composition students to submit a reflective letter that used the contents of their Composition I portfolio as evidence for an argument that the student had either met or not met the five goals of the course. There were two sources of data for this qualitative case study: the reflective letters, and the semi-structured interviews of the participants.

The overarching research question for this inquiry was “what role does reflection play in the teaching, learning, and evaluation of writing?” Contained within that question are the three stakeholders who were involved in the writing assessment: the instructors, the students, and the readers. Although the secondary questions sought information from the stakeholders on how they described their understanding of reflection in light of their role in the program, the three implied questions in this study were: (a) can reflection be taught, (b) can students reflect, and (c) can reflection be recognized?

The findings indicated that students can be taught how to reflect on their writing and that students can, and do, reflect. In addition, the researcher found that holistically-trained

readers could distinguish between surface reflection and deep reflection in the students' reflective letters. A surprising finding was that the readers found the reading session helpful to them as instructors since it afforded them the opportunity to think reflectively about their own teaching. The researcher suggests ideas for future research and outlines implications for the three distinct stakeholders who could benefit from the findings in this study: composition students, writing instructors, and college administrators.

## CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

In 2001, the English department in a Midwestern community college embarked on a project to authentically assess their students' writing ability. We met, agreed on a prompt, and asked students to write a timed, in-class essay. In spring 2002, the essay was handed in with a portfolio of the students' writing, and readers volunteered to read the portfolios. Over lunch, one reader said to another, "I hate it when students do this," and the other reader said, "Really? I love it when they do that." Immediately, we knew we had a problem; we had forgotten to train the readers.

For the second attempt at authentic assessment, we kept the timed essay, trained the readers, and got garbage from the students. We assumed that it was because our department pedagogy stressed process, but we were analyzing the product. For the third attempt, we decided to add an element of revision; we turned the timed essay into a pre-test, saved the student papers, and handed them back at the end of the semester with the directive to revise. Both of these writing opportunities were in-class assignments. The results were again disappointing; most students chose not to revise their original essay and simply recopied it.

Before we embarked on the fourth attempt, we decided we needed outside help. We asked Edward M. White (1994), author of the book, *Teaching and assessing writing*, to help us design an appropriate prompt for our assessment but, over dinner the night before his presentation, he explained his new scoring process for portfolios.

This process, which he called Phase 2 scoring, provides a reliable way to assess portfolios using holistic scoring procedures. To do this, the department had to agree on the goals of the course, clearly communicate those goals to the students at the beginning of the

semester, and then ask the students to submit a reflective letter that addressed how students met those goals over the course of the semester. The holistically trained readers then read and scored only the reflective letters. The reflective letter became a rhetorical argument that used the contents of the portfolio as support for the assertions of competency in the letter.

Since spring of 2004, the English department has been pilot-testing this idea and training readers. Finding an assessment that satisfies external stakeholders (accreditation agencies, state legislators, and the public) and internal stakeholders (students, faculty, and administrators) has been difficult.

Historically, writing assessment can be divided into three waves (Yancey, 1999). The first wave occurred from 1950-1970 and featured objective tests; the second wave featured holistically scored, timed essays and ran from 1970 to 1986; and the third wave, 1986 to the present, features portfolios. Portfolios are a response to involve students in the learning process and to involve teachers with assessment. The goal is to have assessment occur as a natural outgrowth of learning so the two can inform each other (Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 2000).

As with any kind of assessment, writing assessments must be shown to be both reliable and valid, and it is the shifting emphasis of these two constructs that has created the different types of writing assessments. First, validity dominated (the use of objective tests), then reliability dominated (the use of inter-rater reliability in holistic scoring), and now it is back to validity. The problem with portfolios is that, while they are currently accepted as a more valid measure of writing ability since they demonstrate a student's writing ability in multiple texts produced over an extended period of time, many believe they are difficult to score reliably. However, according to White (2007), the ability of holistic scoring to "deliver

reliable scores is so powerful that it has remained the methodology most commonly used for any student writing evaluation, including portfolios” (p. 167). Nevertheless, it has been unsuitable for use with portfolios—until now.

There are several limitations to holistic scoring. The first is that this is only a rank ordering of papers according to the criteria established in the scoring guide (White, 1985). The second, and more serious, limitation is that holistic scoring gives no meaningful diagnostic information beyond the comparative rating it represents.

Another limitation with holistic scoring centers on the rubric. Wilson (2006) believed that rubrics are “relentlessly reductive and quality is more than the sum of the rubricized parts” (p. xv). It is hard to score complex samples of writing with rubrics that are designed to standardize the process of scoring. Wilson chalked up compositionists’ reliance on rubrics to the hold-over of the second wave of assessment, which was the use of holistic scoring. She commented that, as each field of expression broadens its borders, it becomes able to accept new and different ways of expression. According to Wilson, “the field of art two hundred years ago could never have accepted Jackson Pollack’s splattered canvases or Rothko’s subtle bands of color” (p. 36). Unfortunately, the Pollack or Rothko for writing assessment hasn’t yet emerged.

Portfolio-based writing assessment enables assessment to accommodate instruction. It is not possible to “reliably or validly evaluate a performance without knowing the conditions under which the performance was accomplished” (Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 2000, p. 3). As a result, before a portfolio can be judged, there must be some awareness of the instruction that led the writer to produce the portfolio. White’s departmental goal statements resolve this problem.

For a portfolio to be useful as an assessment tool, students must first reflect on what they have learned, and then convert this tacit knowledge about the evidence into explicit knowledge related to their learning (Zubizarreta, 2004). It is a way of making their thinking, which is private, into a public disclosure. In addition, by introducing a portfolio with a reflection about the portfolio, students have taken responsibility for their own work (White, 2007). This metacognitive act, this thinking about thinking, is what facilitates learning.

However, the difficulty with reflective letters is getting students to reflect. Reflection is a higher-order skill that must be taught, and first-year writing courses usually do not make time for teaching reflection. The instructors are busily trying to teach syntax, organization, and revision, and often find the teaching of reflection to be an onerous and time-consuming task because students are so unfamiliar with the concept.

This study came about as a result of the early pilot tests which indicated that perhaps the students were unable (or unwilling) to reflect seriously on both their writing process and its products.

### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to seek to understand the nature of reflection in writing assessment. The experiences of first-year composition instructors, first-year composition students, and trained portfolio readers who participated in a new, holistically-scored portfolio course evaluation program at an urban, Midwestern community college were explored. Reflection was defined as the meta-cognitive activity of reviewing a semester's worth of writing and demonstrating how that writing met the goals of the first-year composition course.

### **Significance of the Study**

This study was designed to expand the extensive, existing body of knowledge on reflection in the writing classroom by mining the perceptions of the three most important stakeholders: the teachers, the students, and the trained readers. However, since White's (2005) scoring procedure is so revolutionary, this study's most immediate impact will be directed towards postsecondary English departments who are required (or who choose) to conduct writing assessments of their students. The knowledge gained from this study will be useful regardless whether the results of these assessments are used as indicators of student achievement or as evaluations of programs.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Several theories provided a framework for this qualitative study; however, since this study was a meta-reflection where instructors, students, and trained readers were asked to reflect on the teaching, learning, and assessment of reflection, the epistemology, theoretical perspective, and methodology must provide a linkage with the subject matter. As a result, this study was framed by a symbolic interactionist theoretical stance that was, in turn, informed by a constructionist epistemology.

According to Crotty (1998), constructionists believe that meaning is constructed, not discovered, and while constructionists can make use of quantitative research, it is always informed by a constructionist epistemology and there is "no talk of objectivity, validity, or generalizability" (p. 16). Creswell (2003) noted the importance of multiple participant meanings in a constructionist epistemology.



Since the portfolio assessment explored in this study used holistically-trained readers to rate the reflective letters for a course evaluation, quantitative data were produced. However, the resulting percentages from the reading sessions were not able to inform practice. To make the percentages useful to instructors, and ultimately to students, a more in-depth look at the central phenomenon of reflection was necessary.

Crotty (1998) defined constructionism as the “view that all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as well, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of human beings and this world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context” (p. 42). Since constructionists do not believe in one true interpretation, this theory of knowledge framed my study; I was not seeking *the* answer to how to teach reflection in a writing class, I was trying to understand the process of teaching, learning, and assessing reflection.

Denzin and Lincoln (1994, as cited in Crotty, 1998) explored the idea of researchers as *bricoleurs* and referred to the *bricoleur* as a jack of all trades. However, Crotty (1998) further refined the definition calling true *bricoleurs* people “who are constantly musing over objects . . . in order to see what possibilities the objects have to offer” (p. 50). This research “invites us to approach the object in a radical spirit of openness to its potential for new and richer meaning. It is an invitation to reinterpretation” (p. 51).

Although a constructionist epistemology is often associated with qualitative research, it was the focus of this study. By interviewing instructors, students, and readers, this researcher invited the complexity of views necessary in social constructionism. The research questions were broad so that the participants “can construct the meaning of a situation; a

meaning typically forged in discussions or interactions with other persons” (Creswell, 2003, p. 8).

Seidman (1998) used in-depth, phenomenological interviewing as a method of research in education because he believed that stories are “a way of knowing” (p. 1). In-depth interviewers attempt to understand the experience of other people and the meaning they make of their experience. He recommended using a three-interview structure, which allows participants to “reconstruct and reflect upon the experience within the context of their lives” (p. 15).

My background as an English teacher and member of the assessment task force shaped my interpretation of the findings. My interpretation flowed from my personal and historical experiences with writing, reflection, and assessment. My goal in this study, however, was to understand reflection in writing from the participants’ perspectives. Taylor and Bogdan (1998) agreed with this idea of multiple perspectives. “For the qualitative researcher, there is something to be learned in all settings and groups. The student’s perspective is just as important as the teacher’s” (p. 9).

The theoretical stance that informed my study is symbolic interactionism. According to Taylor and Bogdan (1998), “from a symbolic interactionist perspective, all organizations, cultures and groups consist of actors who are involved in a constant process of interpreting the world around them” (p. 12). It is only through interaction that people construct meaning because it is through interaction that people share perspectives. “Self is another important part of symbolic interaction. People come to see themselves in part as others see them” (Bogdan & Bilken, 2003, p. 26).

According to Lincoln (2001), qualitative research “recognizes and validates the relationships between the inquirer and those who participate in the inquiry” (p. 111). An emerging criterion of qualitative research is that of communication because it recognizes that research takes place in a community. As a result, the research should “serve the community in which it was carried out, rather than serving the community knowledge producers and policymakers” (Lincoln, p. 113). In this study, the knowledge gained through participant interviews and document analysis will benefit the instructors by providing them with useful information to improve their teaching.

### **Research Questions**

This study addressed the following overriding research question: What role does reflection play in the teaching, learning, and evaluation of writing?

This study addressed the following secondary questions.

1. How do community college composition instructors describe their understanding of reflection in writing and how do they incorporate reflection into their course?
2. How do community college composition students describe their understanding of the metacognitive act of reflection?
3. How do holistically-trained portfolio readers describe their assessment of the metacognitive act of reflection?

### **Definition of Terms**

The following terms were defined for use in this study:

*Assessment:* “the process of gathering and discussing information from multiple and diverse sources in order to develop a deep understanding of what students know, understand and can

do with their knowledge as a result of their educational experiences” (Huba & Freed, 2000, p. 8).

*Case Study*: “an exploration of a ‘bounded system’ or a case (or multiple cases) over time through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information rich in context” (Creswell, 1998, p. 61).

*Direct Assessment*: Demonstration by students of what they “know or can do with their knowledge” (Huba & Freed, 2000, p. 11). In writing, direct assessments are writing samples evaluated by one or more judges (Breland, 1987).

*Formative Assessment*: Assessments that occur within the duration of the course.

*Holistic Scoring*: “method of training readers to do multiple and carefully conducted readings of student essays” (White, 1994, p. x).

*Interrater Reliability*: “the degree to which independent judges can agree in assessing the quality of a single writing sample” (Hays, Hatch, & Silk, 2000, p. 2).

*Literacy*: “being in possession of language, knowing its shapes and possibilities” (White, 1989, p. 3).

*Paradigm*: “a model, pattern, or example. A paradigm establishes rules, defines boundaries, and describes how things behave within those boundaries” (Huba & Freed, 2000, p. 3).

*Portfolio*: “a set of texts whose intent is purposeful, whose audience is specific, and whose meta-commentary or reflection, make sense of the portfolio” (Yancey & Weiser, 1997, p. 3).

*Reflection*: a “mode of behavior indicative of growth of consciousness” (Yancey, 1998, p. 4).

*Reliability*: the consistency of a rater’s judgment of an individual student’s performance (Herman, Aschbacher, & Winters, 1992).

*Scoring Guide:* also known as a rubric. Both reveal the criteria against which a student's work will be judged (Huba & Freed, 2000, p. 155).

*Summative Assessment:* an assessment that occurs at the end of a course.

*Validity:* "the extent to which a test measures what it is supposed to measure" (Bers & Smith, 1990, p. 2).

## CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Since this study focused on the exploration of reflection as assessment in community college writing classes, the review of the literature covers the following areas: higher education and community colleges, writing assessment theory, portfolio assessment, reflection theory, and current research on reflection in writing. The summary of the literature points out the gaps in the literature that this study intended to fill.

### Higher Education and Community Colleges

According to the most recent report of the Secretary of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education, "education is more important to our collective prosperity than ever" (Spellings, 2006, p. vii). The demand for college will continue to grow in the next decade (Zusman, 2005) and colleges will be asked by all constituencies to create a "robust culture of accountability and transparency" (Spellings, p. 20).

Literacy is important to individuals and to the health of the country. Employers expect and need employees who can read, write, and think. Literacy among college graduates has declined from 40 to 31% in the past decade (Spellings, 2006). Since higher education has been recognized as a gatekeeper to high remuneration and status (Johnstone, 2005), once a student is admitted, it is incumbent upon colleges and universities to prepare that student adequately.

As recently as 20 years ago, when Boyer (1987) wrote his seminal study, *College: The undergraduate experience in America*, he purposely excluded community colleges from the investigation because he believed the "uniqueness of American higher education is rooted in preparation for the baccalaureate degree" (p. xii). Now, more than 4 in 10 students attend

community colleges (Spellings, 2006), and many of these students transfer to four-year colleges and universities to receive their baccalaureate degrees. In addition, community colleges are traditionally open-access institutions and thus do not deny admission to students because of their lack of preparation (Laanan, 2003a). Clearly, community colleges are forces to be reckoned with, both in terms of the number of students they educate and the opportunities they afford students.

Adults over the age of 25 currently represent about 44% of students in higher education (Dey & Hurtado, 2005), and approximately 15% of adults aged 40 years and older are enrolled in community colleges (Laanan, 2003b). After having been out of school for years, many nontraditional students are unsure of their abilities. According to Cain (1999), one of the things a community college does best is to “awaken the dormant ability of students” (p. 90).

Once that ability is awakened, it must be assessed. Assessment of student learning should be designed both to satisfy external influences and to provide internal improvements (Bogue & Hall, 2003). In the 1980s, state, federal and accreditation agencies required information on academic outcomes (Ewell, 1997). The first attempts at assessment at community colleges utilized standardized testing, but as dissatisfaction with these types of assessment grew, faculty began to align assessment approaches with “locally developed, campus-specific goals for learning and accomplishment” (Banta, 2004, p. 6). In addition, current assessment approaches like the Higher Learning Commission’s Academic Quality Improvement Program (AQIP) emphasize the continual gathering and analysis of data to reveal how core processes are working (Ewell).

The 1990s moved accountability for community colleges from outcomes assessments to performance measures (Ewell, 1997). Although state governments fund assessment and administrators coordinate assessment, faculty members should be included in assessment because they are the ones who educate the students (Burke & Minassians, 2004). The symbiotic relationship between the college and the faculty rests on the assumption that colleges will provide faculty with the tools necessary to conduct the assessment, and in return, faculty will learn how student assessment at the course level contributes to institutional goal achievement (Friedlander & Serban, 2004).

### **Writing Assessment Theory**

Assessing writing with a well-designed evaluation instrument that is aligned with instructional needs and is technically adequate is a formidable challenge. To develop an instrument and program that will be able to “monitor student learning, evaluate the success of various teaching methods, and guide instructional decision-making” (Isaacson, 1999, p.1), it is first necessary to understand some of the theory behind writing assessment.

White (1985) discussed the two conflicting issues that have shaped the English curriculum. These two “contrasting and conflicting goals of English instruction” are that English studies must simultaneously socialize and individualize students (p. 10). Schooling, in any culture, is entrusted with the responsibility of socializing young people by teaching them its “accepted truths, history, myths, rituals, crafts, and manners” (p. 11). As White observed, manners are crucial to social mobility, and “linguistic etiquette is the most important of all manners in a highly verbal society” (p. 11). As an academic discipline, English socializes students by teaching them such things as writing on lines from left to right,



practicing accepted punctuation, usage, and spelling, and memorizing proper documentation procedures. White noted that “spelling is important solely because people will think you are stupid if you fail to spell words the way everyone else spells words” (p. 12). Spelling is part of the conventions of language, and writing teachers must recognize that an important part of their job is to socialize students. However, socializing skills are neither challenging to teach or to test, so they become an “easy way out” for those who favor formulaic teaching and testing (p. 13).

While the teaching of English must include socializing skills, the “major thrust of the modern English curriculum is directly contradictory to socialization” (White, 1985, p. 13). Socialization encourages students to perform in conventional ways, but good writing only happens when writers are able to think individualistically. English instructors do not want creative spelling or punctuation, but they do want creative ways of thinking. According to White, “basic skills in English ought never, at any level, to be defined in such a way as to omit or minimize the importance of the individualizing function of the discipline” (p. 15).

Another theory that underlies writing assessment is that of behavioral objectives. These detailed statements of goals for instruction required teachers to state what they were trying to teach and how they would measure success. While outcomes assessment is useful, often the objectives were silly for some courses. White (1989) gave the following example:

At the university level, a reluctant scholar required to write behavioral objectives for his upper-division Shakespeare course (during the heights of the fad) responded with appropriate cynicism. His goal for *Macbeth*, he wrote, was that 90 percent of his students, 90 percent of the time, would not kill a king” (p. 132)

Another minor theory that is encountered occasionally in writing assessment is the “writing as gift” theory. In this theory, students (and, unfortunately, some teachers) believe

that one is either blessed with the ability to write or not. Students who believe in this theory often make no effort at composing or revision because they are convinced that they'll never be good at writing, no matter how hard they try (Hays et al., 2000, p. 11). According to Tagg (2003), these people are entity theorists. In contrast to the entity theorists' view that intelligence is unchangeable, incremental theorists assert that intelligence is changeable. Incremental theory is the foundation upon which the process movement in writing is based.

Several of the newer theories of assessment spring from the private sector. One of these is Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI), where the focus is on improving learning of both "teachers and students by collecting and sharing data" (Huba & Freed, 2000, p. 130). Another assessment theory comes from systems thinking. This theory views assessment as a "conceptual framework for seeing relationships rather than things, for seeing patterns of change rather than static snapshots" (p. 6).

As a part of student development theory, Baxter Magolda (1992, as cited in Broad, 2003) advocated helping students move toward self-authorship, which is defined as the "ability to collect, interpret, and analyze information, and reflect on one's own beliefs in order to form judgments" (p. 3).

Huot (2002) was interested in theories of alternative assessments because he believed they are being "supported by the same theoretical movements in the social construction of knowledge that we presently use to explore and explain written communication in a postmodern age. These new theories are being fueled by shifting ideas of teaching and learning" (p. 13).

There is much debate currently on the state of writing assessment theory. The problem lies in the fact that writing, as a discipline, sits squarely in a constructivist camp,

while assessment sits squarely in a positivist camp. These two paradigms are incompatible; when a constructivist object is being assessed using positivist mechanisms, tempers flare.

Huot (2002) and White (2007) believed that psychometric principles (e.g., holistic scoring) are appropriate for writing assessment and that compositionists need to understand educational measurement theory to justify their practices to those outside of composition. However, Lynne (2004) disagreed. She believed that the terms “validity” and “reliability” are so incompatible with the social constructivism of writing that she proposed the terms “meaningfulness” and “ethics.” Wilson (2006), who disagreed with the use of rubrics as a classroom assessment technique, reduced the current state of the assessment/theory debate to “we will either push forward and redefine and redesign assessment to match our pedagogy, or our assessments will drag our pedagogy back to a place we have already begun to leave” (p. 48).

### **Portfolio Assessment**

Portfolios, at the postsecondary level, have been in use since the mid-1980s, and their development began as a response to accountability (Yancey & Weiser, 1997). The move toward portfolios was driven by the “need to measure more complex phenomena, for more complex reasons” (Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 2000, p. 3).

Portfolios also helped to resolve the mismatch between how students were asked to write in the classroom and how they were asked to demonstrate how they wrote. In the classroom, students were encouraged to write on topics of their choosing and were encouraged to revise their writing—often in a collaborative setting. In contrast, when students were asked to demonstrate their writing abilities, they were often faced with timed

essays where the only attempt at revisions involved simple editing for grammatical and spelling errors (Yancey & Weiser, 1997). According to Yancey and Weiser, portfolios bridge the classroom and the test.

The theoretical strength of portfolios is the way they reveal the process of teaching and learning (Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 2000). In addition, they also place responsibility for learning in the hands of the student (White, 2007; Zubizarreta, 2004). While a portfolio is comprised of texts, contexts are embedded within the texts. This is what appeals to teachers of writing. The three elements that make a portfolio more than simply a pile of papers are collection, selection, and reflection, and, of these, reflection is the most important component (Hamp-Lyons & Condon; Zubizarreta).

Reflection is a form of self-assessment, and several studies have shown that self-assessment can interrupt automatic behavior (Hilgers, Hussey & Stitt-Bergh, 2000). Deep reflection, according to Zubizarreta (2004), is the “deliberate and systematic attention to a student’s self-reflective, metacognitive appraisal of why and – importantly – how learning has occurred” (p. xii). Through deep reflection, students analyze the evidence of their own learning. However, this is a higher order skill and one that requires guidance; it is difficult for students to learn this on their own (Latta & Lauer, 2000).

Tagg (2003) used the metaphor of the cognitive economy to describe deep learning. Complex cognition requires active engagement for deep learning, but this engagement comes at a cost to the student. It requires more effort and offers a greater risk of failure. “A hot cognitive economy is one that promotes a deep orientation to learning, hence encourages risk-taking, learning goals, and incremental self-theories” (Tagg, p. 97).

It is widely assumed that writers who can assess their prose can revise their prose (Howard, 2000). Unfortunately, there are two problems that can occur with reflective inquiry. The first is “untempered emotional unloading” (Zubizarreta, 2004, p. 25), which is when students rant instead of engaging in true reflective thought. The second problem, the “shine of rhetoric” (p. 28), happens when students use an overly solicitous tone or invent achievements. Both of these problems can obfuscate the benefits of deep reflection (Zubizarreta). Watson (2000), a writing instructor, believed in the power of metaphors to “encourage new insights or to awaken us more deeply to what we already know” (p. 80). As a result, he used letters as the medium for reflection, but he admitted that, for some students, writing remained “a performance for the teacher and their letters remain perfunctory” (Watson, p. 93).

One task of the teacher is to wean the student from “unexamined dependence” (Larson, 2000, p. 98) on another person’s assessment, and reflection is one tool to help accomplish this (Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 2000). Self-assessment is both a reflective and evaluative act; portfolios are the medium for this kind of thinking to occur. When portfolios are used as an assessment, they often function as a change agent. They bring the curriculum into the open, they expose learning, and they force negotiation and consensus among the faculty (Hamp-Lyons & Condon). However, in order to be effective, portfolios should be flexible and dynamic without the “homogenizing effect of standardization” (Zubizarreta, 2004, p. 34).

Yancey and Weiser (1997) contended that there are two curricula: “the *delivered* curriculum and the *experienced* curriculum” (p. 250). The delivered curriculum is the actual class in which the student is enrolled, while the experienced curriculum is the student’s

interpretation of the delivered curriculum. The delivered curriculum is controlled by the instructor, but the experienced curriculum is controlled by the student. Portfolios help to bridge the gap between the two curricula. By reading a portfolio and its reflective component, an instructor can begin to see how a student experienced the delivered curriculum.

Ewell (1997) took this idea further by dividing the curriculum into four areas. The designed curriculum consists of the catalog and syllabus descriptions, the expectational curriculum consists of the specific assignments and the levels of performance expected of students, the delivered curriculum consists of what faculty actually teach, and the experienced curriculum consists of what students actually do.

### **Reflection Theory**

Historically, reflection can be traced through Dewey, Schön, and Yancey.

#### **Dewey**

The idea of reflective thinking in education dates to 1933, when John Dewey published *How we think: A restatement of the relation of reflective thinking to the educative process*. According to Dewey (1933), reflection “involves not simply a sequence of ideas, but a *con*-sequence – a consecutive ordering in such a way that each demonstrates the next as its proper outcome, while each outcome in turn leans back on, or refers to, its predecessors” (p. 4). Dewey defined the two phases of reflective thinking as (a) a state of doubt, and (b) an act of searching to find material to resolve the doubt. According to Dewey, pre-reflection exists when there is a perplexing situation and post-reflection exists when the doubt has been dispelled.

Dewey (1933) drew a distinction between reciting and reflecting. “To re-cite is to cite again, to repeat” (p. 260). Dewey’s now famous metaphor of the act of recitation compares the mind of the student to a cistern. The information is brought in by one set of pipes, and recitation brings it out through another set of pipes. The skill of the teacher is rated by his or her ability to manage the pipes.

Recitation encourages passivity and passivity is the opposite of thought (Dewey, 1933). According to Dewey:

The mind is not a piece of blotting paper that absorbs and retains automatically. It is rather a living organism that has to search for its food, that selects and rejects according to its present conditions and needs, and that retains only what it digests and transmutes into part of the energy of its own being. (p. 262)

## **Schön**

What Dewey has contributed to the understanding of reflective thought, Schön (1987) has contributed to the understanding of reflective practice. Schön (1987, as cited in Spaulding & Wilson, 2002) identified technical rationality as the prevailing epistemology of the modern research university, and he deemed it inadequate for solving the complex problems of educational practice. Schön (1987, as cited in Kember et al., 2002) argued that a more appropriate model for professional education was equipping students to become reflective practitioners in order to deal with multi-faceted problems.

According to Schön (1987), professional practice can be compared to high, hard ground overlooking a swamp. “On the high ground, manageable problems lend themselves to solution through the application of research-based theory and technique. In the swampy lowland, confusing problems defy technical solution” (p. 3). Unfortunately, the problems of

the greatest human concern are often in the swamp. If a professional practitioner runs into a unique case, and if the practitioner is to deal with it competently, he or she must “do so by a kind of improvisation, inventing and testing in the situation strategies of [his or] her own choosing” (p. 5).

Reflection, then, plays an important role in allowing practitioners to solve problems. Schön (1987) distinguished between two types of reflection: the first is when we reflect *on* an action, and the second, the more important, is when we reflect in the midst of an action without interrupting it. It is this second kind of reflection, what Schön called reflection-in-action, where “our thinking serves to reshape what we are doing while we are doing it” (p. 26).

### **Yancey**

In her text, *Reflection in the writing classroom*, Yancey (1998) re-theorized Schön’s theory of reflection for use in the writing classroom. Schön’s concepts of reflection in action and reflective transfer became Yancey’s reflection-in-action, constructive reflection, and reflection-in-presentation. She defined the three types of writing in the classroom as:

*reflection-in-action*, the process of reviewing and projecting and revising, which takes place within a composing event, and the associated texts *constructive reflection*, the process of developing a cumulative, multi-served, multi-voiced identity, which takes place between and among composing events, and the associated texts *reflection-in-presentation*, the process of articulating the relationships between and among the multiple variable of writing and the writer in a specific context for a specific audience, and the associated texts. (p. 14)

Reflection-in-action can be public or private and its “purpose is to understand the single composing event” (Yancey, 1998, p. 14), whereas constructive reflection takes place over time, contributes to the development of the writer, and is private and often unarticulated.



Reflection-in-presentation is public, and because of this, the “genre contouring the reflection-in-presentation—the letter or the essay—is significant, for any genre will at once privilege and efface certain observations and modes of knowing” (Yancey, 1998, p. 15).

According to Yancey (1998), reflection helps students know their own texts. Traditionally, students have not been responsible for this; instead, teachers have “come to know the texts—in the process of judging them” (p. 18). Yancey grappled with the question of whether one can *assign* or *require* that students be agents of their own learning and decided that agency cannot be required of anyone. As a writing instructor, Yancey wanted her students to do their own learning—as opposed to regurgitating hers. This perspective flows from Dewey’s idea of the passivity of recitation.

Yancey’s (1998) reflection-in-action brings together the “lived curriculum of the students, the delivered curriculum that the teacher designed, and the experienced curriculum of the writer” (p. 46). Constructive reflection is the “cumulative effect of reflection-in-action on multiple texts [and] entails reflective transfer – a writer’s ability to *gather* knowledge and apply that knowledge to similar problems” (p. 51). Reflection-in-presentation has a dual nature: “it’s a reflection, a ‘seeing inside’ and a presentation, a public text representing the self” (p. 70). Schön (1995, as cited in Yancey, 1998) commented on the three types: “it is one thing to be able to reflect-in-action and quite another to be able to reflect on our reflection in action so as to produce a good verbal description of it; and it is still another thing to be able to reflect on the resulting description” (p. 71).

### **Current Research on Reflection in Writing**

Much of the research on reflection is located in teacher training programs. The assumption is that if teachers can learn to reflect on their teaching, they will be better teachers. Spaulding and Wilson (2002) conducted a study to identify pedagogical strategies that helped preservice teachers improve their reflective thinking via journal writing. They found that students responded to different strategies and that personalized feedback on their journals helped them grow. Spaulding and Wilson suggested that instructors must actively teach and model reflection skills in a variety of ways.

Another study that analyzed journals was conducted by Marchel (2004). She used a rubric with three levels—descriptive, analytic, and integrated—to assess the quality of reflection in weekly service-learning journals. She noted that the journal rankings were often higher following an in-class activity on reflective writing, and that while half of the students were at the analytic level by the end of the semester, this statistic could show growth as well as highlight the need for continued support with reflective analysis.

Maclellan (2004) analyzed essays in terms of three elements of reflection: how the issue is conceptualized, what the issue means for practice, and how practice might be changed to resolve the problematic; and each element was assigned one of four levels of reflection – technical, descriptive, dialogical, and critical. Her main finding was the elements were either at the descriptive level or a dialogical level. She also noted that while reflection can take place on an unconscious level, its “use as a tool for learning depends on its being conscious” (p. 76).

Many evaluation tools have been created to analyze reflection. Fund, Court, and Kramarski (2002) created a two-dimensional framework to assess student teachers’ written

reflections. Their framework, which looked at the object of writing and the form of the writing, was based on Van Manan's 1977 study which proposed three levels of reflection: technical, practical, and critical. They also used Hatton and Smith's 1995 study, which developed another framework with three similar levels of reflection: descriptive, dialogic, and critical (as cited in Fund, Court, & Kramaski, 2002). In another study, the researchers created a questionnaire to measure the level of reflective thinking (Kember et al., 2000). They produced an instrument with four scales of factors (habitual action, understanding, reflection, and critical reflection), and each of these constructs had four contributing items. The researchers suggested that the instrument could be used as "a diagnostic tool in courses that aim to promote reflective thinking" (Kember et al., 2002).

Schakel (2001), a teacher/researcher, examined the role of reflective paragraphs as a routine activity to provide metacognitive training for college composition students. Her findings suggested that reflections do not make students agents of their own learning unless the reflections are goal-oriented and specifically focused. She noted that some of the problems with reflection involve " 'recipe following' – this takes students through specific steps and often creates ritualized and thoughtless reflections" (p. 37).

Baker (2001) proposed a new model of reflection centered around Schön's notion of reflection-in-action. At this time, most reflective activities were limited to post-draft, retrospective activities. In Baker's model, students used reflective activities to "reframe indeterminable moments during the drafting process into problem/solution situations" (p. iv).

Hincks (2005) conducted a qualitative study that focused on the use of self-analysis in teaching composition. Her case studies demonstrated that the use of systematic, written, and prompted self-analysis can promote an inner dialogue in student writers. She defined

metacognitive awareness for students as developing a language for “talking about their own writing process, and a method for critiquing their own written products” (p. 6). She also noted that self-analysis must be conducted throughout the semester so that teachers can give feedback on the self-analysis.

Komara (2006) used an on-line intervention package and tried to measure the depth of reflective thinking of pre-service teachers, but the results showed that the students did not demonstrate an increase in reflective thinking in their journals after participation with the intervention components. Holt (2006) observed, interviewed, and read the journals of students in a university introduction to literature class. She assessed the journals for three levels of reflection and found that the triple-entry journal and peer sharing were useful tools for teaching critical reflection.

### **Summary**

Accountability is a necessary condition of higher education, and as a result, it is imperative that faculty assume an integral role in assessment practices. Since community colleges are open-access institutions and educate a diverse student body, authentic assessments are vital to maintaining the health of the institution and to improving the teaching and learning at these institutions.

Writing assessment theory has moved beyond psychometric tests to timed essays to portfolios. Although holistic scoring can effectively score timed essays, it has not been useful for portfolios. However, with White’s (2005) Phase 2 scoring, portfolios can be scored holistically and efficiently in terms of time and money. The recognition that writing lies in a

constructivist paradigm while most assessment measures lie in a positivist paradigm is the first step to being able to better align theory and practice.

While most writing instructors believe in the validity of portfolios as assessment instruments, a reflective component must be included as part of the portfolio. In White's (2005) Phase 2 scoring, this component is a reflective letter. Scholars have been studying reflection in education since Dewey's discussion in 1933. Yancey, a compositionist, extended Schön's idea of reflection and particularized it to the writing classroom.

The current research on reflection in writing centered on pre-service teachers and the use of reflection in journals. This study examined the reflective letters that accompany a large-scale portfolio assessment in a community college setting with first-year composition students. In addition, the focus of the earlier studies had been on the student's ability to reflect, while this study broadened the focus by analyzing not only the student's ability to reflect, but also the instructor's ability to teach reflection and the holistically-trained reader's ability to recognize reflection. This study attempted to look at both the product (the reflective letter) and the process (teaching and learning reflection).

### **CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY**

This qualitative case study was conducted to examine a community college's first-year composition portfolio assessment process. This chapter is comprised of ten sections that describe the methodology followed in this inquiry: (1) overview of the study; (2) philosophical assumptions; (3) methodological approach; (4) research approach; (5) my role as researcher; (6) description of the site; (7) participant selection; (8) data collection procedures; (9) data analysis; and (10) trustworthiness criteria.

#### **Overview of the Study**

The assessment required students to submit a portfolio at the end of the semester with a reflective letter that used the contents of the portfolio as evidence for an argument that the student had either met or not met the five goals of the course. However, while this assessment produced scores from the holistically-scored reflective letter and these scores became aggregate percentages for the number of reflective letters in each category, the assessment did not inform practice in a meaningful way (Appendix A1). In order for this assessment to be truly effective, it became necessary to study the complex interactions between the stakeholders (instructors, students, and trained readers) and to listen to their multiple voices.

This study grew out of three previous pilot studies that were attempts at assessing the first-year composition course at a Midwestern community college. The first pilot study required the students to write an argumentative essay based on a common prompt and include that essay in a portfolio of their work. However, the problems with this pilot were myriad. The readers were not trained and there was no rubric or scoring guide. As a result, each

reader imposed his or her own grading criteria on the portfolio. In addition, there was no consistency in the artifacts contained in the portfolio, thus it was time-consuming and frustrating to read each artifact in the portfolio. This pilot provided the department with no useful information—it simply taught us what *not* to do when designing a portfolio-based course evaluation.

The second pilot used trained readers and a holistic scoring guide (Appendix B1). The format was a pre-test/post-test design with the same prompt for both in-class essays. The students were given their pre-test responses and asked to revise their earlier work. However, most of the students simply recopied their first response. Again, the department was left with no useful information.

The third pilot for the course evaluation utilized White's (2005) Phase 2 scoring system. This pilot focused on first creating course goals and then training the readers with a holistic scoring guide. The English faculty came together and reduced the competencies of the course (Appendix C1) to the five course goals (Appendix C2). In the fall of 2006, a packet was sent to all composition instructors explaining the assessment (Appendix C3). Next, a cadre of volunteer instructors was trained using the holistic scoring guide to assess sample reflective letters. Since the reflective letter is an argument for whether the student had met the course goals and the artifacts in the portfolio were simply referred to as evidence in support of the claims of the author, it was not necessary to read all the artifacts in the portfolio. This study revealed the need to weave reflection into the entire composition course, and not wait to spring it on the students during the last few weeks of the semester.

My study built on the three previous studies. I interviewed composition instructors, students, and readers who participated in the Phase 2, district-wide, scoring study to see how

they described their involvement in either teaching, learning, or recognizing reflection in the writing classroom. I also conducted content analysis on the reflective letters that were submitted with the portfolios.

### **Philosophical Assumptions**

According to Crotty (1998), epistemology is “a way of understanding and explaining how we know what we know” (p. 3). It is the theory of knowledge. Constructionism is one theory of knowledge which claims that “meanings are constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting” (p. 43). In constructionism, there is no true or valid interpretation because all meaning is constructed.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) offered a concrete example of a constructed reality with a story about Jocko Conlan, “a National League umpire, who, when trying to define criteria for calling a given pitch a ball or a strike, finally declared, ‘They ain’t nothin’ til I calls ‘em’” (p. 70). People who believe in a constructed reality doubt whether there is a reality (Lincoln & Guba). Constructionists expect people to see different things, examine them through different lenses, and come to different conclusions (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). A constructionist approach is in direct opposition to objectivism, which is generally found embedded in the theoretical perspective of positivism. Positivists quantify, constructionists qualify. Positivists search for averages, while constructionists search for syntheses (Rubin & Rubin).

In a study framed by a constructionist epistemology, the multiple meanings of the participants are valued. The questions posed to the participants in this kind of study are broad so that the participants can construct their own meaning of a given situation, and researchers look for complexity of views. This approach was appropriate for my study for two reasons:



(a) writing stems from a constructionist epistemology; and (b) I was asking my participants to construct their own meaning of reflection.

### **Methodological Approach**

My approach grew out of what I wanted to know, which is how instructors, students, and readers understand reflection in writing. Most research questions in qualitative studies are open-ended, evolving, nondirectional and begin with words such as “what” or “how” (Creswell, 1998). Rubin and Rubin (2005) noted that “boiling down answers into numbers strips away the context, losing much of the richness and complexity that makes research realistic” (p. 2). In addition, qualitative research recognizes that advocacies are “ever present and turns away from the goal as well as the presumption of sanitizing” (Stake, 1995, p. 95).

Qualitative research is especially suited to my study since the purpose was to seek to understand the nature of reflection in writing assessment. A positivist approach would not lead me where I need to be. In fact, it was this “boiling down of answers into numbers” that led to my study. One of the frustrations with the three pilot studies of the assessment tool was the lack of context; we had only aggregate percentages and rank ordering, which told us nothing about how the instructors, students, and readers understood reflection.

### **Research Approach**

This study was conducted to evaluate a new writing assessment process at a Midwestern community college. It used a case study methodology. A case study is an exploration of a case, or bounded system, over time through “detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information rich in context” (Creswell, 1998, p. 61).

In this study, the case is the writing assessment program at [Darby] Community College during the fall 2006 semester. The multiple sources of information included interviews of students, instructors, and readers involved in the assessment program as well as the reflective letters from the students' writing portfolios.

Case studies are particularly suited to evaluations since the person or program being evaluated is the case. As with any research approach, however, there are limitations to using a case study approach. Case studies can be time-consuming, costly, and can oversimplify or exaggerate. "They tend to masquerade as a whole, when they are, in fact, just a part" (Merriam, 1998, p. 12). In addition, case studies have been faulted as not being generalizable. Stake (1995) commented that "the real business of case study is particularization, not generalization. We take a particular case and come to know it well, not primarily as to how it is different from others, but what it is, what it does" (p. 8). However, Merriam (1998) believed that, if a case study is the best approach to answer the research questions, then its strengths outweigh its weaknesses. A good case study is, according to Stake (1995), an "interactive communication, first between the single researcher and the case, later with the reader" (p. 136).

### **My Role as Researcher**

As an English instructor at the community college where this study was conducted, I was actively involved in the three previous pilot studies. I am a firm believer in the importance of authentic assessments, and I value the fact that the administration at my college allows us the time to design an assessment vehicle that provides useful information. Although the need for assessment was currently being fueled by our accreditation

procedures, we wanted the composition course assessment to provide more than graphs and percentages. The dialogues with our colleagues that these three pilot studies created were far more valuable than determining how many students scored a “3” or a “4” on their reflective letter.

An important aspect of this portfolio assessment is that it did not impact either the instructor or the individual student. The scores on the reflective letters were simply turned into aggregate percentages, and neither the administration, nor the faculty, nor the readers attempted to group the scores by class sections. In addition, the score on the reflective letter had no bearing on the student’s grade. By the time the readers read the portfolios, the students had already received their course grades. Thus, although this course evaluation was a summative assessment, it was not a high stakes summative assessment.

I was involved again in the fourth iteration of the course assessment. I volunteered my own composition classes for all three of the studies, I served as a reader for all of the studies, and I helped train new readers. While my closeness to my research might be detrimental to a quantitative study, it added a personal dimension in this qualitative study. My interview questions were filtered through the lens of my experiences teaching reflection and my experiences reading the reflective letters.

Since I studied my place of employment, possible compromises in my ability to disclose information could have arisen. To offset possible problems of studying in my backyard, I employed multiple strategies, such as member checks, peer review, and an auditor to create confidence in the accuracy of my findings. Another potential problem could have been that, as a full-time instructor, I worked with many adjunct instructors. Although I have no formal power at the institution, I do interact with the District Chair of

Communication (who hires the adjuncts) and I often serve on hiring committees. It was possible that these relationships may have shaped my respondent's comments.

The question of insider status is still being debated (Merriam, 1998; Rubin & Rubin, 2005). There are no right or wrong answers to this question, only the costs and benefits involved. The benefits of being an insider are many. Two of the most important are that the "intimate knowledge of a setting may be an asset" (Creswell, 1998, p. 114), and the "ability to perceive reality from the viewpoint of someone 'inside' the case study rather than external to it [might be] invaluable in producing an 'accurate' portrayal of a case study phenomenon" (Yin, 2003, p. 94). In addition, interviewees may assume that a researcher who is an insider is sympathetic and understands their experiences (Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

Other benefits of being an insider are easy access to interviewees and minimal cost (Creswell, 1998). In addition, an insider can "seem less threatening, in part because [he or she] know[s] the rules and [is] bound by them" (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 87). People are more willing to talk if they know a person and both share a common background – if so, an insider becomes less of a "rootless stranger" (p. 93).

The costs of being an insider all deal with potential biases. Creswell (1998) worried that studying one's backyard could "severely compromise the value of the data; individuals could withhold information, slant information toward what they want the researcher to hear, or provide 'dangerous' knowledge that is political and risky for an 'inside' investigator" (p. 114). Seidman (1998) was concerned with the problem of distance. "If they are so intimately connected to the subject of the inquiry that they really do not feel perplexed, and what they are really hoping to do is to corroborate their own experience, they will not have enough distance from the subject to interview effectively" (p. 26).

Before I undertook this study, I seriously weighed the pluses and minuses of being an insider in this study. I felt that since my subject of inquiry was of a non-inflammatory nature (I was not evaluating a person or the institution, I was merely attempting to understand the concept of reflection and how it functions in a course assessment), I would not be the recipient of “dangerous” information. Since I was truly perplexed about this question, I felt that I could maintain enough distance from my participants to interview effectively.

Since the results of this study were to be reported in a dissertation, I masked the names of the participants and the names of the colleges. The participants were made aware of this in the informed consent document they signed before they interviewed with me.

### **Description of the Site**

[Darby] Community College opened its doors to 28 students in 1966, and now, 40 years later, has 28,000 college credit students annually, and 32,000 students enrolled in continuing education and business training classes. Back then, the first classrooms and offices were located in a former grocery store; today, [Darby] has six full-service campuses in an eleven county, mid-state region. The college offers 75 programs and transfer degrees and more than 3,000 classes. [Darby’s] three institutional goals are quality, affordability, and service.

Although the official mission statement of the college is “to offer quality programs and courses to meet the different community interests, student abilities and personal objectives of citizens of all ages and levels of education, for the purpose of improving the quality of life, the economic conditions and public welfare of our state” ([Darby] Annual

Report, 2006), the advertising slogan for the college is “Creating Opportunities for Your Success” ([Darby] Student Handbook, 2006).

The college is a publicly supported two-year institution serving the capital city metropolitan area and surrounding communities. The college district encompasses 6,650 square miles or about 11% of the land area of the state. Approximately 20% of the state’s population resides within the district. It is unique in that it serves several distinct demographic populations in one college system. “It is an urban college, enrolling the largest minority population of any higher education institution in the state and it is a rural college, with one of its six campuses serving rural communities with declining populations. Another campus sits in the middle of the fastest growing area in the state and the remaining campuses serve suburban areas and small cities” ([Darby] AQIP Systems Portfolio, 2006, p. v).

Course and program competencies are developed by the faculty. In 1986, [Darby] committed to a competency-based structure for its course and program curriculums. It was the first step in the assessment of the student learning process. Assessment of student academic achievement is faculty-driven and is supported by the deans, provosts, and the Chief Academic Officer. The processes are guided by the needs of the program of study, faculty, institutional needs, articulation needs, and industry needs and requirements ([Darby] AQIP Systems Portfolio, 2006).

The culture of [Darby] Community College is open and trusting, and there is a strong tradition of honoring academic freedom. As a discipline, instructors decide whether to require all instructors to use the same text or to allow their instructors to choose their own texts. In the English department, both full-time and adjunct instructors are allowed to choose

their own texts, and this means, of course, that there is no common syllabus. However, all instructors are expected to adhere to the competencies of the course.

Since its inception in 1966, [Darby] Community College has focused on growth and meeting the needs of its various constituencies. As a result, the institution was not driven by data. Recently, however, data have begun to play an important role at the college. An institutional researcher was hired in 2002 to head the newly-created Office of Planning and Research, and the data that have been generated on student retention and persistence as well as the data from student satisfaction surveys are disseminated now through the college's internal webpage and shared at college-wide meetings.

### **Participant Selection**

A purposeful sampling strategy using maximum variation sampling was employed. The participants were either composition instructors, composition students, or instructors from other disciplines at a Midwestern, urban community college.

Since purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to gain as much information as possible, careful selection of the participants is crucial. Rubin and Rubin (2005) compared the research arena to a theater in the round and suggested that the researcher select participants from different vantage points in the theater. Since I used maximum variation sampling, I selected the instructors based on two criteria: (a) their status at the college, and (b) their familiarity with the assessment program. I had planned to interview three full-time instructors at the [Kennedy] campus of [Darby] Community College. However, since there were not enough full-time instructors teaching stand-alone composition classes (i.e., not connected to a learning community), I interviewed two full-

time instructors (both of whom had participated in several of the other pilot studies) and one part-time instructor, who taught four sections of Composition I and who had not participated in any of the earlier, formal pilot studies.

Since most of the readers were part-time instructors, I selected the readers based on the following criteria: (a) their discipline, and (b) their familiarity with the assessment program. During the reading session, I offered the readers the opportunity to volunteer to participate in the study. Since it was important that I interview them soon after the reading session and the session was at the beginning of a new semester, I wanted readers who felt they had the time to devote to the study. Once I received the “Yes, I’d be interested in participating” sheets, I sorted them by discipline and familiarity. All three readers happened to be female because we did not have many male readers at the reading session. All of the readers were adjunct instructors, and the college paid them \$50.00 to attend the reader training session and \$100.00 to attend the reading session.

Of the readers whom I interviewed, one was a sociology instructor, one was a business instructor, and one was a composition instructor. In keeping with maximum variation sampling, I tried to find readers from different disciplines. I chose to interview an English instructor as a reader to find out if she noticed anything in the letters that would help her better teach reflection to her writing students. During the interviews, I noticed that she switched between answering the questions as a reader and answering the questions as a composition instructor. Although it was hard for her to separate the two roles, she noted that serving as a reader helped her as a teacher.

For the student selection process, I asked the three instructors to recommend six students: two whom they considered above average, two whom they considered average, and



two whom they considered below average. Since the instructors were providing student names to me, I didn't want the students to be skewed toward the higher end; I was hoping to get a cross-section of typical community college students. From the pool of 18 students, I interviewed nine, three from each of the instructors. To contact the students, I followed the Institutional Review Board's approved e-mail and telephone scripts (Appendix B2). I interviewed seven of the students during the last two weeks of the fall 2006 semester, and I interviewed the last two students during the first two weeks of the spring 2007 semester.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

Once this study was approved by my committee, I secured permission from Iowa State University's Institutional Review Board to conduct the study with human subjects (Appendix D). There were two sources of data: the reflective letters from the portfolios, and the semi-structured interviews.

The reflective letters on which I conducted content analysis were selected with a random sampling process (Yamane, 1967) by the college's institutional researcher. In fall 2006, there were 1,728 students taking Composition I face-to-face at all six [Darby] campuses. The Director of Institutional Research noted that a good sample size for this project would be 325 students, but he provided a list with 400 names on it.

As sometimes happens in research projects, we did not achieve the preferred sample size because many of the students on the list (which was generated after the final drop date in November, 2006) did not turn in portfolios. In addition, one of the instructors, who had 21 students on the list, moved to another state and forgot to send his portfolios to the [Kennedy]

campus. Since this was the first district-wide study, however, we were not surprised by some of these problems. We ended up with a total of 262 portfolios.

The interviews for the instructors and readers were conducted in either the library or my office, with the exception of one reader. In her case, I traveled to her office at a large university. The interviews for all of the participants were tape-recorded and transcribed. I used an interview protocol for each type of participant: instructor, student, and reader (Appendix B3 – B5). I also had each participant complete a Research Study Questionnaire (Appendix B6), so that I could contact the participants easily for the member checks.

The students were interviewed on the campus in either the library conference room or a private, unoccupied office. Although I had hoped to conduct these interviews as a focus group, after my initial e-mail to the students, I realized that it would be impossible to find a time for the students to meet as a group. Thus, I conducted all of the interviews individually, except for two students from the same class who preferred to be interviewed together. After the interviews, I was glad that happenstance forced me into individual interviews for three reasons: (1) the tapes were easier to transcribe with just two voices; (2) the students appeared to need quiet time to frame answers; and (3) some of their answers were somewhat private, and I was glad there was no one else in the room to hear their thoughts.

I used Seidman's (1998) methodology of the three interview series. Seidman focused on context, reflection, and developing a rapport with his participants:

The first interview establishes the context of the participant's experience. The second interview allows participants to reconstruct the details of their experience within the context in which it occurs. And the third encourages the participants to reflect on the meaning their experience holds for them. (p. 11)

While I had initially planned to conduct three interviews, it became apparent with the first interview that I could condense my protocol questions for Interviews 1 and 2 into just one interview. Thus, I interviewed the three instructors and the three readers only two times, but we covered all the questions on the interview protocol. The nine students were interviewed only once. I also used Rubin and Rubin's (2005) responsive interview model to guide the interviews. In this model, "the goal of research is to generate depth of understanding, rather than breadth" (p. 30).

As a participant-observer, I also took field notes. I observed two reading training sessions (in November 2006 and January 2007) and the actual reading session in January 2007. Seidman (1998) noted that while observing provides access to people's behavior, interviewing allows the researcher to put that behavior in context and provides access to understanding their action.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis was an on-going process involving continual reflection about the data. An inductive process was applied to attempt to make sense of interview transcriptions, documents, and field notes. Lincoln and Guba (1985) tied data analysis to constructivist epistemology. "Data are, so to speak, the *constructions* offered by or in the sources; data analysis leans to a *reconstruction* of those constructions" (p. 332). Lincoln and Guba noted that, when using the method of constant comparison, "hypothesis generation begins with the analysis of initial observations, undergoes continuous refinement throughout the data collection and analysis process, and continuously feeds back into the process of category coding" (p. 335).

In this study, the interviews were transcribed, the transcripts were read, and the comments worthy of note were marked with brackets. After the relevant passages were marked, the material needed to be reduced before it could be analyzed, interpreted, and shared. To reduce the material in the transcripts, I adopted two distinct approaches. I first developed profiles of each of the participants, and then I returned to the transcripts and grouped the relevant passages by categories and analyzed them for themes.

Seidman (1998) believed that creating a profile of a participant is an effective way to “open up one’s interview material to analysis” (p. 102), and that a profile in the words of the participant “allows those words to reflect the person’s consciousness” (p. 102). The crafting of the profile allows interviewers to share what they have learned from the interviews in the form of a story. According to Seidman, the profile belongs to both the participant and the interviewer; “it is in the participant’s words, but it is crafted by the interviewer from what the participant has said” (p. 102).

Once the profiles were created, I returned to the transcripts and marked relevant passages, grouped them into categories, and then coded them by theme. This was done by separating the passages and labeling each with a notation system that designated the original place in the transcript. I used the participants’ initials, the number 1 or 2 to denote whether the passage appeared in the first or second interview, and the page number of the original transcript. After they were labeled, they were put into folders by category. Then I used a similar process for the reflective letters. I marked the relevant passages, grouped them into categories, and then coded them by theme.

The original 26 categories that emerged from the reflective letters and the 47 categories that emerged from the interviews were then combined and condensed to form nine

overarching themes. In order for a category to become a theme, it had to be triangulated by at least two participants or two sources. Most were triangulated by at least three sources or participants. These nine themes were: reflection as auto-response, reflection as cognitive development, reflection as conversation, reflection as opportunity, reflection as pedagogy, reflection as real world skills, reflection as responsibility, reflection as resistance, and reflection as understanding.

### **Trustworthiness**

The qualitative study must convince the reader that procedures have been followed faithfully. Through careful design and transparency, a qualitative researcher can ensure that the results are credible to the reader. Stake (1995, as cited in Merriam, 1998) employed a journey metaphor to encapsulate this problem. “Knowledge gained in an investigation ‘faces hazardous passage from writer to reader. The writer needs ways of safeguarding the trip’ ” (p. 201).

The conventional criteria of internal validity, external validity, reliability, and objectivity are difficult to apply in a constructivist epistemology. Lincoln and Guba (1985) used the following terms in place of the conventional criteria. Internal validity became credibility, external validity became transferability, reliability became dependability, and objectivity became confirmability. Lincoln and Guba offered several specific techniques that were designed to address each of the criteria.

### **Credibility**

Four techniques that increase the probability that credible findings will be produced are: prolonged engagement in the field, persistent observation, triangulation, and member

checks. As a researcher studying my own backyard, I met the first two criteria—prolonged engagement in the field and persistent observation—because we started this assessment process in 2001. During the data analysis, I triangulated the research by using multiple participants, multiple types of data (observation, interviews, and document review), and by presenting a “substantial body of uncontested description” (Stake, 1995, p. 110) when I described the case.

Member-checking is another technique for enhancing credibility. In this technique, summaries of participants’ realities are returned to the participants for verification. Member-checking provides the following opportunities: (a) assess intentionality, (b) correct errors of fact, (c) summarize, and (d) assess overall adequacy (Lincon & Guba, 1985). I returned all of the profiles to the participants. While only one of the students acknowledged receipt of the profile, all of the instructors and readers either agreed with the profile or offered minor corrections, which usually centered on their previous jobs or academic studies.

### **Transferability**

The principle technique available for transferability is providing a thick description necessary for readers interested in making a transfer of the findings to their own settings. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), if there is to be transferability, “the burden of proof lies less with the original investigator than with the person seeking to make an application elsewhere” (p. 297). However, it is up to the original investigator to provide enough thick description so the reader can make an informed decision, which is what the profiles are intended to provide—enough information so the reader can decide if the conclusions of this study can be transferred to another situation.

### **Dependability**

The inquiry audit is a technique that is used to establish dependability. In this technique, an auditor examines the process of the inquiry and then attests to the dependability of the inquiry. The auditor also examines the “product—the data, findings, interpretations and recommendations and attests that it is supported by data and is internally coherent” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 317). In this study, I submitted my final account to a peer reviewer who utilized Stake’s Critique Checklist for a Case Study Report (Stake, 1995). In addition, I reviewed my process and my product with an auditor who holds a Ph.D. in education and serves as the judicial officer for a community college.

### **Confirmability**

The technique that helps to establish confirmability is the audit trail. Yin (2003) referred to this as the chain of evidence. One kind of source material that should be included in the audit trail is the reflexive journal, a diary in which the “investigator records information about self (hence reflexive) and method” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 327). My reflexive journal was comprised of post-it notes and index cards that I used to capture my thoughts at a particular point in time. Some of the other materials that should be included are raw data, data analyses, data syntheses, process notes, and instrument development information (Lincoln & Guba). My audit trail was contained in two large notebooks and five small notebooks. These notebooks were arranged by category and easy to navigate.

The issue of trustworthiness is an important one to the reader, and it is incumbent on the researcher to provide the safeguards necessary to allay readers’ concerns. As mentioned, I utilized the following techniques in my study: prolonged engagement in the field, persistent

observation, triangulation of sources, member checks, a reflexive journal, an inquiry audit, an audit trail, and the use of thick description when writing the final report.

### **Delimitations**

This study was limited to White's (2005) Phase 2 scoring process of the writing assessment for Composition I students at [Darby] Community College in the fall 2006 semester. This study focused solely on the student's ability to write reflectively. It did not include an investigation into students' overall writing ability, or their writing anxiety, writing apprehension, or writing aptitude. It did not attempt to measure reflection. The central phenomenon explored was reflection; how writing instructors teach it, how students understand it, and how trained readers assess it.

### **Limitations**

The findings of this qualitative case study could be subject to other interpretations. In addition, the purposeful sampling procedure used in this study decreased the generalizability of the findings.



## **CHAPTER 4. PROFILES OF THE INSTRUCTORS, THE STUDENTS, AND THE READERS**

Profiles are a powerful method for reporting data because they are “presented in the words of the participant” (Seidman, 1998, p. 103). They are consistent with the process of interviewing, but the intrusiveness of the interviewer has been stripped away to allow the reader to see the consciousness of the participant. In addition, detailed description creates the advantage of accessibility (Merriam, 1998), which enables the reader to follow the participant into places that are usually off limits to outsiders. In this study, those places are the minds of the instructors as they wrestle with teaching a new concept to students, the minds and written products of the students as they reflect on their work over the course of the semester, and the minds of the readers as they try to evaluate the learning that has occurred. In the profiles that follow, I bracketed my words so that they would be easily distinguishable from the words of the participants.

### **Profiles of the Instructors**

*Writing teachers are a passionate group. We are convinced there is something fundamentally sacred about teaching writing – about helping another person to express and share their humanity through language. (Wilson, 2006, p. xx)*

#### **Ellie Martin**

##### **Academic background**

In 2001, I received my B.A. from [Sanderson] College where I had a double major in English and theater performance. I took a couple of years off and went back to [Clarke] State University to get my Master’s in rhetoric, composition, and professional communication.

While there, I was a teaching assistant for Comp I and Comp II. I started teaching as an adjunct here at [Darby] Community College the last semester I worked on my Master's degree. That would have been Spring 2004.

### **Defining reflection**

Reflection is looking back on what you've done and learning from that experience. It's seeing the challenges that you encountered and the positive things that you did with that experience and the things you can definitely work through on that experience. Reflection in writing would be the same thing, but I understand it more as the recursive process, just building on top of the things you have learned.

### **Incorporating reflection**

Some of the techniques I use are peer reviews and, for most assignments, a reflection letter. I ask them to write a letter to themselves about their challenges and successes they had in writing their assignment. I also do what I call a "Thought Card." This is just a card where they write their thoughts, and you'd be amazed at the quality of the reflection I get. I don't say that they have to write something that will stick with me for the rest of my life; it's just their thoughts, and although some of the students will write "I'm tired" or "I'm hungry"—little things like that—a lot of my students have been pretty reflective writing about their papers overall. They'll say things like "I can't wait to get this paper off my hands" or "I think I did a bad job because of lack of time" or "organization was a big issue for me on this paper."

My philosophy of writing is "true genius lies at thinking within the box, not outside of the box." I think this is true because we do give them the box. We give them the structure;

it has to be 5-7 pages, it has to have MLA citations, etc. We do give them the foundation, so your creativity is inside of that foundation. The foundation is important for me because if my students don't meet the criteria I've set up, they're not going to pass. I do read their paper and I make comments on it because I think comments are an important part of reflection. I hate it when students just look at the grade and throw the paper in their book bag. I look at my comments as part of the conversation; their writing is one part of the conversation and my comments are another part of the conversation.

Their response to my comments will either end the conversation or begin a new conversation. As a result, I try to write questions for my comments. Actually, at the beginning of the semester, I make more prescriptive comments; I'll cross out words, draw arrows, put "dangling modifier" or "verb tense," but toward the end of the semester, I'll say "What do you think of the organization here?" or "Do you think this topic sentence works for the rest of the paragraph?" "Why did you put this paragraph here?" "Are there any inconsistencies that you can find in this paragraph?"

MLA is very frustrating for me because with the last two papers, we go through our works cited pages numerous, numerous times, and I'll get a handful of students in a class that can do it right. I guess I need to find a way to reflect back on that. I had so many students this semester that I wasn't able to do a lot of conferencing or individual conferences, and I think that really helps with the reflection process, too.

At [Clarke] State, we were taught the sandwich technique of grading. You do the bread ("Oh, this is good") and then the meat, the real substance (what needs to be improved in the paper) and then another little bread (like "good topic"). I did that when I first started to teach, and then I decided that it was sort of a waste of time for me and for the students. If I

can't find good things, there's no sense to write "good job." I tell them that if I write "good" on their paper, I mean it, but it doesn't mean that it can't still be revised in some way.

I'm anxious to see the reflective letter this semester because I guess I feel like this will be the easiest assignment because of all the handouts I've given them. It seems like I'm saying "this is exactly what the format should look like, here are the five competencies, here are the questions you can answer in the competencies, and here's what your in-text citations should look like." However, they can put any of their writings in their portfolios; we had five major papers and journals.

For the journals, students bring in a topic and if they choose, they can bring in any form of media. We discuss their topic for about five minutes and then we write about it. Sometimes, they'll bring a clip from Dr. Phil, we'll watch it, and then open it up for discussion. Some people really love the journals and some people don't like them; I get the evaluations back both ways. I figure, though, that if people don't like them, they can suffer through for ten minutes, and it gets them writing. I don't pick up the journals unless I see that students aren't working on them.

When I did a personal pilot test this summer with my Comp I students and their portfolios with reflective letters, I had some really exceptional students and then I had some students that I was greatly disappointed in because I knew they could do better. I understand, though, that Comp I isn't always everyone's first priority, and if somebody's happy with a C or a D, that's fine.

Comp I class is about writing, but it's also about communication, and when you can learn how to communicate in different ways to different kinds of people, it's a good thing. I always, always do a presentation in my Comp I class, and I probably learned that at [Clarke]

State where they're really into written, oral, visual, and electronic communication. Usually, when I don't have so many students, I ask the audience to do peer review on the presentations by listing three successes and three weaknesses the presenter had. I then type all those up and give it to the student so they can see their peers' comments. It's one thing for me to say "you used a lot of fillers," but it's quite another to read a peer's review that said "I counted 75 fillers in your five minute speech."

I like teaching Comp I because they come in and they're really nervous about their writing and coming to college. Sometimes, the adult students haven't been writing for 15 years or so. I like to see the growth; how they write at the beginning and how they write at the end – the diagnostic compared to the position paper. It's probably something for me, but I see a lot more growth in Comp I than in Comp II, and I think that I might have been a part of that growth.

Although I have always used reflection in my classes, this semester, I wanted to make sure that my portfolios were good. Since I was part of the team who read the pilot test batch of portfolios, I noticed that some were horrible, some were good, and some were just average. Since I'm an adjunct, I'm on from semester to semester, and whether I'm rehired depends a lot on the work I'm doing. I felt a little constrained by it this semester. I started using reflective letters at [Clarke] State, but I guess when I feel like the reflective letters aren't good, I just get bogged down, and I don't know what to do to make them better. Sometimes the students aren't specific about using examples from their papers. I don't want them to just say "the organization was good," I want them to say, "well, this is what I worked on, maybe I had a challenge with organization and then I went back and I did the outlines, and as you can see from this paper, this is what the organizational pattern looks like now."

When I served as a reader for the portfolio pilot test, I noticed that if the format wasn't right, if the spacing was off, then all of a sudden, even though the content can be right, I'm thinking, "well, you can't follow directions because that's not how the format is supposed to be" so that would affect the overall score. As a teacher, though, I feel that way with the works cited pages. We go over them and over them and they have a textbook to refer to, but when I get these papers back and the works cited page isn't right, I just feel like I don't know what more I can do. I feel the responsibility needs to rely on the students because they're in charge of their successes. I always say, "I don't give you a grade; you *earn* your grade."

[Regarding teaching the business letter format], I don't think it's a burden, and since I was a reader, I know there needs to be some type of format so that when the committee is reading through these papers, we can read them efficiently, but I also think that it stifles a little bit of personality and creativity in writing, too.

### **Changes in teaching reflection**

It's a big responsibility as an instructor to have students reflect on their work. I think a lot of students don't know what reflection means, so a lot of the weight falls on the instructor throughout the semester to continue to keep that idea of reflecting on everything they've done. In some classes, it's been easier for me and in some classes, it's been harder for me. I tend to have them reflect more on their major assignments than on their journal entries, but now that I'm thinking about it, I think they could reflect back on their journals. They could look over their entries and talk about which conversations they really want to be

a part of, which conversations they were worried by, or which conversations they weren't really very interested in. I try to think of writing and reflection like a conversation.

Another thing I would have done is to think of peer review as reflection. I had them do their peer review in class and then they got the peer review back and they discussed it, but I think I would have had them write a response to that review. Their papers had started the conversation, then we have more dialogue going back with the peer review, and then kind of completing it is their response to the peer review.

Peer reviewers often think: "What can I bring? I'm not a very good writer, so what can I bring to somebody else's paper?" It's the idea, though, of whenever you read something, you're learning, learning what to do and what not to do. I try to make my class a relaxed setting; I refer to them as my "community of writers." My idea of peer review is to look for content because that, to me, is what is really important because you can have a perfect paper, but not say anything. You can, of course, also have a paper that's full of errors, but that has a great content. The other thing I would have done is a peer review over the reflective letter.

I was not very comfortable bringing in samples (but students love to see samples) because I don't want it to be "here, this is exactly what it needs to be"; I think that makes the students feel too tight within the structure. I think a peer review over the reflective letter would've helped because many students seemed to think that reflecting over their process was easy. Many of my students said they wrote the letter in 30 minutes or an hour, and when I read them, I could tell. They didn't proofread them or their format was off. I think a peer could have commented on this. I also had my students complete a works cited page for their reflective letter and a peer, hopefully, would have been able to notice some of the little

punctuation problems—like where the periods go. I had them submit a works cited page because we asked for in-text citations; it seemed wrong to teach them all semester that these two go hand-in-hand, and then deliberately skip the works cited page on the last assignment.

The one thing I really enjoyed in reading the reflective letters is when the personality of the writer came through. I've known them all semester, and now I can see sort of a personality in their writing, and it's really neat to be able to see that when they reflect on their writing, they can follow the assigned format and address the competencies, and still have their personality come through. However, I only saw that in 20% or fewer of the letters.

For some of my students this semester, the reflective letter was the worst piece of work I've seen them hand in all semester. This was worth 100 points, and while this is a lot, it won't make or break them. It might bump them up or down a grade, but it won't make them go from a B to an F. The students could ask me what their grade was going into this assignment, and I think some of them figured they may only have to get a C– on this to stay at a C, and they're fine with that. The hardest thing, though, is when you know they can do better.

It's important to me that the students read my comments. It's the whole idea of writing as a process. Writing *is* a process, but it all comes down to game time. The process is how you practice; the game time is when the essays are turned in. So it's process (practice) and product (game time). Sometimes, the students don't get the game time; they think it's still a rehearsal.

In the exit interviews this semester, I had a lot of students who came in with the "I'm so stressed out/this semester was so hard." I don't think I would have graded my students' papers any differently, but if I had known some of the issues they were going through, we



could have used them to reflect on. I wish I had taken more one-on-one time with them. In the future, I'd try to do two interviews, one during midterm and then an exit interview, too.

I really appreciate being given the opportunity to reflect back on my teaching process. I can't always have conversations with people about what I can do differently; well, you can have those conversations with yourself, but it's different when you verbalize it.

I was frustrated when I read the letters because I feel like we worked on a lot of things in the semester, and I didn't see the things we worked on in the reflective letter. I want to carry on the conversation with them and say, "Why did you do it like this or what were you thinking when you did this?" I had a student I thought would do exceptionally well in the class, but she ended up getting a D. She said in her letter that she could have done better, but she had a lot going on this semester, and it wasn't my fault. She was reflecting back on her experience, not on her writing, but that's important, too, I think, to reflect on the overall experience. Life happens.

## **Teresa Matthews**

### **Academic Background**

I have a Community Mental Health Associate degree from [Darby] Community College that I received many, many years ago. I then went from [Darby] to [Lane] University where I received my Bachelor's in Education with an emphasis in special education and English. I taught in the school systems, both in special ed and English, and then I went back to [Lane] as a teaching fellow and got my Master's degree in English.

From there, I moved into the corporate world when I answered an ad for a writer. I first wrote training videos, and then I went to another company where I produced video

training programs, such as floor care, pizza, and customer service. I next got a job with a large insurance company and I trained people in business writing, leadership development, leadership training, and executive development. I left the insurance company and created my own business which provided consulting services to organizations, and I also wrote an on-line training program. I had been an adjunct instructor at [Darby] for years, and when my husband got hurt on the job, I accepted a full-time offer to teach at [Darby]. I teach Comp I, Technical and Business Writing, Developmental Writing, and Introduction to Literature.

### **Defining reflection**

Reflection is looking back on what you have said or done and thinking about it and making some form of judgment or evaluation or analysis of it. In meta-cognition, you think about how you learned and then you go a step beyond mere reflection. You demonstrate in writing what specific skills that you had learned, how you learned them or why you learned them and you measure the progress. This is a lot more difficult. First of all, writing is a more difficult skill base than just thought reflection. Thought reflection is at the cognitive level, but writing takes it a step further. It's a very difficult process to take something from your mind and analyze it at a cognitive level and then translate that into written language.

When I was a teaching fellow at [Lane], I made a research proposal that suggested that as freshman composition instructors, I thought we were expecting students to demonstrate, in written language, a syntax level that they were not ready for. I guess I see some similarity with written reflection in terms of whether the students are mentally and emotionally at a point that they can successfully complete a reflective writing process. Perhaps there are stages to get them there. I think it's a hard thing to measure and I think it

certainly shouldn't be measured at the end of the composition class; I would think that it would be down the road at the end of Comp II or some other form of measurement.

### **Incorporating reflection**

When I started teaching years ago, we didn't call it reflection, but we always had students make some kind of either verbal and/or written commentary about the writing process. We asked questions like "explain what you went through from the beginning of the assignment to the end of the assignment," and "explain what the problem was and how you overcame it." While these questions weren't quite as focused as our current questions that are based on the competencies, at least they were questions about the writing process. I think, however, that now we are moving more in the right direction.

I incorporate reflection into my class by asking students at the end of every essay to reflect on what they've learned. I start with some general questions about the writing process and I always include the competency about recursive writing, and then I add more competencies as they are appropriate for the essay assignment. This is always an in-class assignment, but if they need more time, I let them take it home to finish it. Everybody writes at a different pace, and I don't want to rob anybody of time if they are a slower writer or if they need more time to think or if they want to be more thorough in their responses. I usually give them about 30 minutes at the end of every writing assignment. I also ask them to attend an individual conference to discuss what they're learning and why. It's very informal and we also talk about their grade and I review one of their rough drafts.

This reflection really helps me understand them. Even though the early ones aren't filled with a lot of technicalities, I notice that over the course of the semester, there's a bit more thought; they have a better idea of what's being expected of them and how to write it.

In addition, after every peer review, I have them complete a revision plan. This simply asks them to examine the feedback they've received, and to tell me, specifically, what they intend to do with their paper. Based on their plan, I send them either to a handout that I've created or to the textbook where they are required to complete a set of very specific questions on every aspect of that particular rhetorical strategy. These plans almost sound like a teacher; they say things like "I'm going to do this, and I need to do that. I need more examples, and I need to make sure my in-text citations are correct." The students become very in tune with the expectations by doing this.

Before they ever do the peer reviews, though, I have them start out on smaller, lower-risk items. I start out so tiny - with just a paragraph that they summarize in class. There's no grade attached and everybody takes a look at everybody's summary. It's low-risk, low-key because that, in and of itself, is anxiety ridden for a lot of students. Some are very anxious about sharing their work with others, so we start real little and we build on that. They do some analysis and then they write their first reading response, which is just a one-paragraph summary. We start small, verbally, and then we move to the written reading response, and then we move to something that's far more attached to them emotionally, something in which they've invested a lot more energy and it's higher risk, and then we do peer review.

In my peer review, I allow them the opportunity to exchange with whomever. The first peer review worksheet is real sketchy and some students are afraid to say anything, but by the end, they know how to respond to certain elements in writing because they've

received feedback either from me or from others and they become their own little mini-teachers; they're catching things that they can see in others' writing. During the conference, I ask if this is helpful and 99% believe it is, although some of them wish that people would give more open feedback. They are looking for some constructive criticism. Once they've exchanged their peer review sheets with their classmates, I let them discuss it. Some are so open with each other, while others are quiet and withdrawn and they feel extremely uncomfortable talking about it, but the written feedback is helpful to them.

Once the student has created his or her revision plan, I have a revising and editing workshop for the last two papers. We go to a lab and use the [Benthoff] State University questions to work through their rough draft. Some learners make the changes right on their drafts; others type it all out and then revise it. When it's time to hand in their final draft, they also hand in their rough draft, peer review worksheet, revision plan and research photocopies, and I go through every last one of them.

Including reflection in my course overall had been really kind of an organic or holistic thing. I've always done some reflecting because it makes sense, it helps them learn, and I've learned more from them by what's helping them. When I used to teach classes, I never thought much about what the competencies were or the goals of the class or how I wanted the students to demonstrate that; I just didn't make that strong connection. Of course, I saw curriculum and competencies, but I never saw students evaluating themselves on the competencies. This makes total sense, however. Out in the workplace, I saw this all the time; employees were measured by the competencies and they had skill sets they had to demonstrate. It's the same as this assessment. The questions are the same: what did you learn, what did the managers see that you had learned, and how to do you measure that? This

makes total sense because this is the way the corporate world operates in terms of performance management, performance evaluations, and performance appraisals. We are helping our students with one of the core skills with how you are paid.

One of the key skills of developing people in the workplace was the ability to articulate, communicate what you learned and how you learned it, so that's the core. It makes perfect sense that we would do it in an academic setting. That's how people can identify what they learned and, more importantly, share what they learned to help the instructor teach even more effectively for other learners; it's an ongoing process.

This is just like grading the end product, the final paper. I feel the end product is the direct result of whether or not the students have fulfilled the stages and that's why I don't grade any of those because they all contribute to a greater or lesser degree. Just like on the job, you're graded on your results and not on your efforts on anything else; it's the output. That's what I grade on, and I give them every opportunity to improve the quality of their output. Some take the opportunity and some don't.

The only negative I can think of with this assessment is that I'm not sure two-thirds of the students have the capacity to demonstrate, in writing, that they've met the competencies. The important aspect is that out in the workplace or even in your own personal life, you are reflecting and evaluating and measuring all of the time, so this is really a core communication skill and I see it has real value. When I was a student, no one asked me what I learned; they told me what I learned. Sometimes, as an instructor, I feel woefully inadequate in knowing whether I am giving them what they need. In terms of the whole reflective process, I feel as if I could learn a lot more from a learner and teacher standpoint, from both ends of the spectrum.

Since I volunteered my class for the very first pilot, I noticed in those early letters that many of the students were pretty much just playing back what they thought someone wanted to hear. It sounded very robotic, and I take responsibility for that. This past spring, I did encourage the students to be themselves and I saw a little bit more flexibility, but they were still lock and step, so I'm not sure they're really getting it. Maybe that's because we really haven't sat down to talk to them to see how they felt about the writing assignments. We're just taking it from a written piece of paper that we've asked them to do. I wish I'd followed up with my students to ask if they liked this and did this make sense. I use the portfolio assessment as my final exam; they bring the portfolio to me on the final exam day, but then they don't get any feedback on it and they don't keep it. Maybe if I did one less writing assignment, I could have them hand it in so that I could actually sit down and talk to them about it.

### **Changes in teaching reflection**

It's a big responsibility to be a composition instructor charged with teaching reflection. You have to be certain in your own mind of the competencies that you're teaching, and then you have to be certain of how reflection links to those competencies, and then you have to think about how to teach it. For me, it's been perplexing, sometimes frustrating, and sometimes gratifying. It's posed its own challenges to also include reflection as part of the curriculum. I've been working on this for several semesters and I've learned each semester how I can create reflection as part of an almost seamless part of the writing process as opposed to something extra the students need to accomplish.

As I mentioned, in the corporate world, the ability to reflect, to know what you have learned so that you can build on your strengths and improve on your weaknesses, is prized in terms of professional development. It is part of the performance appraisal process in most of your organizations. There is a strong link between reflective writing and the ability to think about what they've done and articulate what they've learned. Certainly this is important in other college classes. It has a corporate or workforce application as well as an academic application. However, I still feel that, at this time, I have much to learn on how to successfully incorporate reflection within the Comp I curriculum.

In my classes, I use a holistic reading rubric, and when I do the evaluation of the reflective letter, I still continue to use the same grading rubric that I've applied to all of their writing. The one thing I'm not sure of is whether, as a comp instructor who uses this reflective letter as a final exam, I'm including enough activities and opportunities for the students to take reflective writing as a competency in and of itself as a final exam evaluation.

Although reflection is absolutely incredible, it's a much different writing activity than is writing an essay, whether it's timed or prepared. They seem to have two different audiences, in a sense, and two different purposes. My greatest question is not whether it is right or wrong, but whether I am doing the best that I can in terms of evaluating those students on that particular type of writing

If we had students writing reflections that were graded throughout the semester and the students were given specific feedback on what they were doing right and wrong, as I've been doing with my essays all semester, then it would be more apples to apples. To practice timed writing, I have them write in class, then they wait in line and I give them immediate



feedback. Again, my greatest question is whether I'm doing a good enough job for the student to use this as a final assessment.

I guess, at this point, if I could do what I wanted to do in the Comp classroom based on what I've learned thus far from reflection and what I've been doing before, I would figure out a way to include reflection at a much more heightened way. This is important because metacognition is knowing what you've learned and being able to articulate it is a competency in and of itself. Currently, reflection is not listed as a competency; there's nothing in our competencies about reflection. There's recursive writing and revision, but that's not reflection.

In my final reflective letter, I'd say that two-thirds of them were just your typical assignment – going through the motions. However, more than one student said things like “if I hadn't done this assignment, I wouldn't have realized how much I did learn.” There were a few students who were really making a connection and not just doing an assignment.

I appreciate the opportunity to participate in this assessment because at first, and to be honest with you, from an instructor's perspective, something like this is also a reflection of you as an instructor. The first couple of semesters that I participated in the pilot tests, I felt like I hadn't done a good job of teaching them the reflective letter, but as time progressed, I've grown up a little bit. I've tried to improve the class and I'm beginning to sort through what I'm asking them to do and what's being evaluated. I'm coming to better terms with the assessment.

As an instructor, when you're asked to instruct something that's going to be evaluated, whether it's you evaluating it or the students evaluating it, you are the facilitator of the learning, so you are a part of this reflective letter whether you want to be or not.

Initially, I thought I liked the way I used to do it and I hated to give that up, but I found the value in this and I know I'm a better teacher because of it because of the way I focus assignments. It isn't the reflective letter I owe it to; it is the fact that you are being asked to identify specific competencies. Before I used to just kind of be this holistic teacher, and I had my own philosophical preferences of writing. This assessment really does hold your feet to the fire in terms of the instructors as well as the students. It's the same as what we do in the workplace. We have to have certain skills that we demonstrate in the workplace and we're praised on them and we're paid for them, and that's not much different from this – even though this is a grade instead of a paycheck.

When I first started out in this assessment process, I had anxiety and then I had my own self-doubt, but once I looked at this, I thought, “you know I'm going to have to do a good job teaching these competencies.” I did a lot of soul searching, from an instructor's perspective, because you are being asked to demonstrate your ability to facilitate.

## **Hannah Jenkins**

### **Academic background**

I have a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from [Lane] University in theater with minors in English and speech. I have a Master's degree in theater from [Jackson] State and I have 2½ years toward a doctorate in theater from [Bailey] State and I have a Master's in composition from [Clarke] State. I taught high school English, speech and drama for eight years, and at the same time, I was an adjunct instructor for [Darby] Community College. I was at the [Busby] campus of [Darby] Community College for nine years as a composition instructor, before that I taught theater and composition at another community college, and

I've been on the [Kennedy] campus of [Darby] for the last three years as a composition instructor.

### **Defining reflection**

Reflection in writing involves making choices about what to say, who you're saying it to, and how to say what you're saying. Reflection is thinking about making those choices and it can come at the first part of the process when you're trying to figure out your communication or it can come after you've made that act. In writing, there's sort of an informal reflection when we do the pre-writing and it can come at the end when the writing is completed.

### **Incorporating reflection**

I have my students do a reflection after what I call the "complete draft"; the complete draft is the first draft they turn in. Some people call it a rough draft, but I play a semantic game so that I won't just get a paragraph. At this point in time, I ask them to reflect on their writing choices: who is their audience, what information did they need to convey to their audience, and how effectively have they communicated that information. I grade these reflections based on the completeness of their answers and the accuracy of their answers.

I give them another handout with questions on their revision choices when they bring in their final draft. They do this reflection in class; that way I have a captive audience and they won't forget to turn in their reflection. I have found these reflections to be pretty truthful, but mainly I find them to be a bit thin. It's really pushing hard to get them to be reflective. I ask them to put evidence in from their papers that substantiates their reflection. In addition, I ask them to articulate what skill they used from previous papers, and what

writing skills from this paper do they anticipate they'll be able to use in subsequent papers. Reflection is not just about their writing and their writing choices, but it's also about what skills they're picking up. I want to make them consciously aware that this is a skill-based course and get them to communicate what those skills are.

Another assignment that we do in class is to read articles, and then I have them reflect on the author's writing choices. I think it's easier for them to reflect on somebody else's writing because they don't have as much invested in it. That's one of the reasons reflection is so hard for them in their own writing because they are filling in the gaps themselves. When they get their peer reviews back and a reviewer tells them to add more detail, they think "Oh my gosh. I have to add more details, I thought I said everything there was to say." This leads into my whole way of responding to writing which is asking questions to help them fill in the gaps.

[As a composition teacher], I find reflection valuable when I make it meaningful to them. We did a midterm portfolio and practice reflective letter, and what that showed me was they did not understand how to utilize specific examples from their papers. One of the problems I think they had with the midterm was that I'm in computer labs and their portfolios are electronic portfolios, so I had to first teach them how to link things. It seems like they put all their energy into putting the electronic portfolio together so that the thinking about the reflective letter went by the wayside.

### **Changes in teaching reflection**

Being a composition instructor charged with teaching reflection means that I'm part of a team, part of a coherent process rather than just an individual in a classroom doing my

own thing. In addition, it charges me to be reflective about my own teaching. I look to see if I accomplish what it is that I say I'm accomplishing.

My personal reflection process started earlier than this assessment; it started when I started attending the Written, Oral, Visual, and Electronic (WOVE) workshops at [Clarke] State. When they were sharing their assignments with us, they would always include a reflective assessment tool.

My comment on my being part of a coherent process stems from my previous frustration as a Comp II teacher. Often I would get students who I didn't feel were prepared for Comp II, and I could do nothing with this frustration because there was not a departmental effort to address the inequity of that. In addition, I also wanted my colleagues in Comp II to feel like my Comp I students were prepared, and I had no context and no basis for knowing whether I was actually doing that. Our terminology has been problematic; we haven't had a common language. [Clarke] State has a booklet that Comp I and Comp II students get and it says here's our approach, here's the terminology (it also defines those terms), here's the coherence and consistency in the department. Although I don't think [Darby] will ever get to that point, this next fall will be my 20<sup>th</sup> fall associated with [Darby], and at least this is like a step in the right direction to try to accomplish something.

It occurred to me that while the assessment process is about finding out where our students are, how much they're learning, the process was the pebble that went into the water, and now the ripple effect and the wave effect going out and the rings surrounding it are what are we doing as a department, how do we mesh together. The ripples around the whole thing are making people aware of their philosophical approach and the alignment of their teaching

to their philosophical approach, and the alignment of the reflection to the philosophical approach.

[Regarding this assessment], one of my colleagues found that her students seemed to take this process more seriously because they knew that their portfolios were going to a committee out there somewhere. This is versus the thought process of “this is just a final that I have to whap out for my instructor and so I spend no time on it because I basically know what my grade is.” I shamelessly used that idea to motivate my own students, too. I didn’t tell them that only a few were going to be read; I led everyone to believe that possibly the committee would be looking at their portfolios.

It seems to me that there are actually three layers going on here. The first is the instructor’s philosophy of writing, the second layer is the student’s philosophy about learning to write, and the third level is, for lack of a better word, the level of maturity. That could probably be further defined as reflective maturity. I had trouble with this concept in class. Some students had difficulty moving toward an awareness of others; having them take an accountability of one’s self is difficult. It would be fascinating on an informal basis to give a maturity score to the letters. That’s kind of what we’re doing with our holistic assessment, but not in a direct way. We’re doing more content; we’re scoring whether or not they say “I’ve learned” versus some who say, “I learned I had to revise, so I would get a better grade.”

I had one student who said it’s not that I didn’t learn it, it’s that I chose not to do it. This seems like it is a huger, deeper problem than I ever imagined, that’s one of those rings I’m talking about. In my classroom, it’s more than just how do I prepare the materials; it’s how do I manage people to grow up and take responsibility. I assign them topics, but I say if you don’t really like this topic, you can choose your own topic, but since we’re working with

this one in class, you'll actually be doing double the work. I've found that when you assign a topic, it breaks them out of fear; the me-absorption. Sometimes if they write about what they want to write about, all you get is all that opinion spew that's in their head without any work or any process. They don't do any research because they say "I just know this stuff."

### **Profiles of the Students**

*Students do not revise their work because, in their heart of hearts, they don't really think there is anything wrong with it. (White, 2007, p. 84)*

#### **Ellie's student – Andy Nichols**

##### **Academic background**

I started here at [Darby] Community College in January '06 after I graduated from high school. My graduating class had around 105 students. I'm a criminal justice major and this is my second semester. I'm taking Comp I, speech, western civilization, and micro economics. I took three years of English in high school—all of my required classes—and I worked for [A-1] Security which involved a lot of writing reports. I worked mostly at night, but sometimes I worked during the day at the pasta factory. Before that, we'd have a car and drive around town and check churches and stuff.

##### **Defining reflection**

Reflection is what happened in the past, kind of like history. Reflection in writing would have to do with what you wrote or your style of writing, writing about how it's changed or improved.

**Incorporating reflection**

I understood the reflective letter assignment as how I wrote in the beginning of the class to how I wrote at the end of the class—like did I improve or understand certain styles of writing. Since I had all of my old assignments, I was able to figure out the portfolio. I knew the order of the big assignments, so I put the three essays in that order.

My first essay was “Behind Glass.” It had to be related to my career field, so I walked through the [Johnson] County Courthouse. In my second paper, I explained what ageism meant, and my third paper was an argumentative paper on K9 dog use in prison. My parents work at the new correctional facility, so I had videos that showed cell extractions with the dog and then with the CERT (Correctional Emergency Response Team). My thesis was that the dog is better because the inmates usually come out and there is no use of pepper spray that can affect the employees. Once I reviewed my portfolio, I saw that even though I kind of knew what MLA was in the “Behind Glass” paper, I learned a lot more about it by the “K9 Dogs in Prison” paper. I like writing when I get to choose my topic; otherwise, I don’t really like writing.

We also did journals in class every Tuesday, or maybe every day. People would pick a topic and we were supposed to reflect on it to decide whether we should do something about it. One topic was North Korea making missiles. I could’ve put these journals in my portfolio, but I chose not to because I wrote them kind of fast and they were sloppy.

My favorite days in class were the workshop days. On these days, we brought in two copies of our rough drafts and just switched with two other people. The teacher gave us a sheet to tell us what to look for. I liked these days because it was a chance for me to let



somebody else find all the errors I didn't see. Also, I could see that my structure was the same as most people, and that the flow was as good.

On those days, it was hard to be the editor because I never considered myself a great writer, so I could find the small errors. You know, though, I thought they were small, but they might have been major to them, and I just didn't want to make anybody upset with suggestions either. If I had a really bad paper, I just kind of asked them to look at it and asked what their thesis really is. I mostly asked, "Does this make sense?"

I like the reflective letter as a final exam because I'd rather not take one of those fill-in-the-dot tests actually. I liked that it was kind of open and I didn't get told. It wasn't a bunch of questions. I didn't have to answer what MLA meant or what block style was, I just kind of showed that I knew it in the paper. It let the people going through my portfolio know that I knew what I was talking about; that's what made it a good final exam.

### **Ellie's student – Hulk James**

#### **Academic background**

I graduated from high school in 1996 and went to [Redfield] Community College for two years where I studied laser-optics. I then went to work for about eight years and then started at [Darby] Community College in the fall of '06. Laser-optics is the study of lasers, electronics, and optics; all three work together to create laser beams which are used for many different purposes.

For my work, I traveled the U.S., Canada, Mexico, and Japan repairing industrial lasers used in manufacturing. I trained customers how to use their lasers and how to maintain them. I worked for a company in Chicago for about six years, and then I started my own

service company and now I just travel the U.S. and some in Canada repairing lasers. [My customer range is broad]; Lockheed Martin is one of my customers and so is a guy who makes shelves for Best Buy.

I'm currently a full-time student, but I don't have class on Fridays, so I work Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. I'm taking liberal arts here and I plan to transfer to [Clarke] State University for their mechanical engineering program. I'd like to complete as many classes here as I can because it's only a ten-mile round-trip from my house as opposed to a seventy-mile round-trip to [Clarke] State.

I've always enjoyed writing. In high school, I wrote for the high school newspaper and worked my way up to editor. When I was in college the first time, there really was no creative writing, and I've really done none for ten years or so. I guess I had kind of forgotten how much I enjoyed being creative and putting thoughts on paper. My classes this semester are Comp I, microeconomics, finite math, and public speaking.

### **Defining reflection**

Reflection is just review. I use reflection at work when we make changes to the equipment to make it more productive, more user-friendly. Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't, but there's always a time period that we just kind of let things work for awhile. Then we'll meet after those months and see how things are going and decide what changes to make. Reflection at work is just making simple changes and monitoring the outcome. At the high school newspaper, I used reflection with every article. I knew many people were going to be reading the article and I had to live with those people, and I didn't want anyone looking down on me for what I'd put in an article.

### **Incorporating reflection**

In Comp I, I found the peer edits helpful to me as a writer. For example, I have a tendency to be kind of wordy; I like to describe everything in detail. More than once I got comments back about sentences being too wordy and I always took that very seriously. There were times when I went back in and made changes and other times I liked the way it sounded and I just left it. Another example was that I got a comment back that said my research paper was boring. Actually, the comment said, “Make me want to finish this paper.” I’m really good at introductions, but sometimes the excitement of the paper trails off. In this case, I went in and removed some facts and added a little more personal intervention.

I found that it was sometimes hard to do the editing on a peer’s paper. Once, I was paired with a foreign student who may not have had the best command of the English language. Helping her was actually kind of easy because I knew that she needed the help, and I guess I thought she would not be insulted by me trying to help her. However, I found the work of another student (who I was often paired with) to be kind of boring and it always had a tone that was not pleasant to read. It did kind of bother me to work with her because I thought maybe that was just her personality. I made written comments on her worksheet about her tone (whether it was sarcastic), and I always let her know that I could tell what type of mood she was in from her writing. I don’t know if she took that as a positive critique or maybe she didn’t notice, but I always made note of it because it really stood out in her work.

In addition to peer edits, we started nearly every class with a journal entry, and I loved doing those. Econ was my class before comp, so I was kind of stuck in the econ mode. The way she did it was to have a student bring in a journal topic, they would discuss their thoughts on it, the class would write in their journals, and then we would all have a

discussion after it. The entire process took maybe ten minutes out of class, but it was a way to get my mind into the writing mode, into the creative mode, especially after having a very boring econ class.

It was also a very open environment in the class and people were encouraged to give their personal thoughts and attitudes on whatever the person who brought in the topic brought up that day. I found that for me, especially being a nontraditional student in a class with a bunch of 18, 19, 20 year-olds, it was a way to connect with the younger students. I guess maybe the biggest thing for me was that I found that ten years in age isn't really all that much. I was very nervous coming back that I would just not be able to connect with anybody here; you know, I thought that ten years would be a huge disconnect from where I was when I was first going to college.

I'm currently working on my reflective letter. I've written the rough draft and I want to go back and re-read it now. I always write things and just kind of let them sit for a few days and then go back to them; I'm kind of in that period now. The instructor did say that she wanted some personality in the letter; she didn't just want "we did this and we did this and we did this." She wanted our thoughts and opinions on what we had done, and I had no problem giving my opinion, so it was kind of a fun thing to do—just kind of reflect on the semester as a whole.

One thing that surprised me as I read through my portfolio was how once when a student brought in a topic and when the initial discussion started, I remember thinking that I had no thoughts and didn't care about their topic, and then I remember just starting to write and I think my first sentence as "I don't know if I really care about this." However, I found, once I started writing, that I had some pretty strong beliefs about their topics. One topic was

on how the producers split the people on *Survivor* up by race this year; I didn't think I cared, but by the time I finished writing, I was ready to write to the president of CBS and tell him what a mistake he'd made.

I knew I was going to struggle on the research paper with the MLA documentation. I understand the importance of it, but the issue is that I just don't get excited citing sources. I found it tedious and, I'm almost embarrassed to admit it, I also found it difficult. I never dreamed I would have that much problem because we did this in high school and we had a great English instructor. It's been ten years, though, since I'd done it, and I had forgotten how much I disliked it, and how hard it was. I figured I'd jump right back into it and be fine, but it was tough.

### **Ellie's student – Rhonda Mitchell**

#### **Academic background**

I graduated from high school in 2003, and then I went to a private, two-year, business college, but it was only for a semester because it wasn't what I wanted to do. I took a couple of night classes over the next two years and got my CNA (Certified Nurse's Aide) and then decided I wanted to go into nursing. I started here at [Darby] Community College full time this semester. My classes are composition, chemistry, ethics, and psychology.

I work full time at an agency as a CNA. I work with kids, ages 5-17, who are mentally and/or physically disabled. The kids I work with live at the agency. I took my CNA class (which is 75 hours) at another campus of [Darby] Community College. I took psych as a night class and then dropped it and took small group communication instead. I lived in

[Harper], moved to [Kennedy] to go to business college, moved back to [Harper] to take the CNA, and now I've moved back to [Kennedy] to go to school here.

I took the general writing classes in high school and then I took advanced comp my junior year. Although the teacher said it was the equivalent of a college course, we didn't get college credit because she didn't get certified, or something to that effect.

### **Defining reflection**

Reflection is something in the past; looking back on something that you've done or you've known. I've used reflection at work when I've had to write statements. I had to write a statement for my physical therapy when I fell out of the chair and injured my back. We also have to write Adverse Incident Reports when something happens to the children.

### **Incorporating reflection**

I used reflection in my comp course when I wrote my paper on the agency I work for. I had to write about past experiences. I also used reflection when I wrote the reflective letter. That was easy; it didn't take me long. It took me maybe an hour; it wasn't that hard at all. I used the list of things we needed to include and I wrote examples of the five core competencies (like how I showed them in my work), and then I organized them to make sense to everybody, not just me. Then I wrote my reflective letter.

In class, we had to write a paper and then we had to pretty much throw that paper away and rewrite it, so you had to reflect on the information you already knew, but you had to put it together in a different way. That was my first paper on the agency where I work.

We also did journals in class; the students just came up and gave topics. There were a lot of war topics because we have a lot of soldiers in our class and there was a topic on saving the environment. I didn't include these in my portfolio.

The teacher told us to write our papers one way and, I'm being completely honest, I just did it my own way. She told us how to do everything, how to go about it, how to search for information, how to organize it, and how to lay it out. To me, it was kind of confusing because it's totally different from anything I've learned, so I did it my way. I did a research paper on feminism and I decided to look at whether we've gotten anywhere or if we're just viewing it differently. I decided it's kind of a circle; I don't think it's any better, it's just that we have different problems. I know things, but I just can't explain why I know them.

I'm glad I don't have to take Comp II. I feel that my skills are competent for what I need to be able to write. I don't enjoy writing; I enjoy the research process, I enjoy learning new things, I enjoy taking other people's ideas and putting them with mine, and I understand it in my head, but to get it to make sense to everybody is my main problem.

I liked my comp class in high school because a lot of the time we got to choose what form we wanted to put our topic in. When I'm a nurse, writing will have to make sense to me and the doctors, but not me and you and 30 other people with all different kinds of backgrounds. I understand that I'll have to talk to patients and families and stuff, but it's different. I've already had to do that as a CNA; I already know things that a lot of patients don't know and you have to be able to tell them, you know you have to speak to your audience, but it's not 30 different people. You tend to know the patient, the resident, or the child a little bit so you know how to say it to them . . . I hope that doesn't sound rude. I feel

that with composition you have to change your style for every teacher so it's hard to know what the teacher wants—especially out of that first paper.

I thought this teacher made the students do too much of the thinking in the class; I think it should have been the teacher. I thought the reflective letter as a final exam was pretty pointless because I'm not the teacher, so I don't know why I should have to explain why I've accomplished these five core competencies. I think that's up to the teacher. I don't think I should have to defend myself. If I got the grade, then wonderful; if I don't, then I need to do it again. You did have to know your strengths and weaknesses, though, to write the letter.

### **Teresa's student – Hank Anderson**

#### **Academic background**

I started at [Darby] in spring 2005 and I took a preparatory math course, an English course, and study strategies. I took the summer off and moved to Phoenix. In the fall of 2006, I took a sociology class and Small Group Communication at a college in Phoenix. In spring 2006, I took Modern World Religion, a history class, and a western civilization class. Then I moved back to the Midwest and went back to [Darby]. I took Art Appreciation, Comp I, a psych class, and an American history class in fall of 2006. I plan to finish my AA degree at a community college and then transfer to a four-year college. This spring, I'm taking a computer information systems class and a political science class, both online, since my family is moving to Chicago.

I like to write and comp class was my favorite class in high school. Our teacher would have a topic for us to write on in our notebook, and it was usually a current event and



we'd give our opinions and ideas about it. We'd write a page a day and he'd collect them every few weeks. I'm not afraid to write; I like it.

### **Defining reflection**

Reflection is looking back and seeing what happened in the past from a more recent point of view. It's almost like a memory; it's how you see things now as opposed to before.

### **Incorporating reflection**

In our comp class, we wrote four different essays in the course and we used reflection to review the essays. We looked for appropriate word choice, use of detail, opinions and ideas, summary, and persuasion. We'd write two drafts before the final and then hand them all in. Writing takes me a long time to do. I write a paragraph and then I read it and change it, and I do this over and over for the whole paper. I'm very deliberate; I change words and sentences. Sometimes, I'll delete; this is faster, but most often I like to write by hand.

We did peer reviews for every essay. We read the papers and then we were asked to write a one-paragraph summary and one paragraph that brings out the positive things and then one paragraph to bring out the negative things. For the review, we'd just sit by people and sort of form informal groups. When I would review other people's papers, I was pretty easy on people. I tried to be honest and I'd make suggestions like, "Maybe you could have done this." I tried to give more positive feedback. [As an author], sometimes I found the reviewer's feedback helpful. One person, though, just wrote "good" all along the side of my paper. That wasn't very helpful. Sometimes they'd say, "This needs to be changed," and sometimes I'd change it and sometimes I wouldn't.

For the reflective letter assignment, I reflected back on the semester. I looked for things that I either improved on or needed to improve on. I studied the instructor's comments and noticed patterns in them. For example, a lot of my comments said "use more descriptive words," and "your paragraphs and sentences ramble on." I think I improved on it, although I'll never be perfect at writing.

I feel comfortable with research, and I'd never used EBSCOhost before. When you surf the web, it's hard to determine when to cite. Plus, you just get little bits of information. What you really want is a solid source. When I wrote my paper on acid rain, I wanted to include the information that I'd seen a lot of. By using more sources, it was easier to determine what to include.

### **Teresa's student – Heidi Ashworth**

#### **Academic background**

I graduated from a large, urban high school in May of '05, and this is my first year at [Darby] Community College. In high school, I took a lot of English classes. I took English 9 with a great teacher, and then my sophomore year, I took speech, and language and literature. My junior year I took AP English and Composition I, and in my senior year, I took advanced composition. I had five different English classes with five different teachers.

This semester I'm taking Comp I, literature, philosophy, trig, and western civilization. I took the AP test, but I only got a two, and you need a three to get college credit. We did a lot of writing in my English classes in high school and we learned to use EBSCOhost and databases and the MLA citation system.

**Defining reflection**

Reflection is how I interpret the story or what I'm reading; what I think, what I feel, and what I think it means as far as in the world.

**Incorporating reflection**

I used reflection in high school in English 9; when we read books, we were supposed to reflect on the meaning of the books. In Comp I, we had to reflect on a topic question every day in our journal. One of our topics was what we thought of the terrorists after 9/11 and another day it was about governments and capitalism. We would write for 20 minutes and she'd collect the journals and comment on them every two weeks or so. I like writing in the journals, but I never used them in my papers because they were unrelated. They were just to get us working hard. In Advanced Comp, the journals had to be 125 words and the topics were focused on writing.

In my comp class this semester, we do reading responses where we have to summarize the story and then reflect on the weaknesses and strong points within the essay. The first one was hard, but after awhile, I kind of got used to it and could understand it better, and I could see the weaknesses and strengths right off the bat.

With peer reviews, we comment on what we thought the importance of the person's paper was. We did this for every essay, and I personally thought it helped me write my own papers only because I could see what I wanted in other people's papers, and then with that I could write my own papers more effectively.

The papers we wrote this semester included a remembered event, a profile, a concept paper, and solution paper. When we were assigned the portfolio and reflective letter, she

gave us a worksheet that asked which was our favorite piece, which one was the most helpful, which was the least helpful, which one we liked, that kind of thing. This really helped me explore, but what was the most helpful, as far as the writing went, was seeing the improvement within each paper.

After the worksheet when I wrote my letter, I used the introduction to talk about what my thesis was and what I was going to talk about, which were the four essays and how the rough drafts correlated and changed throughout the process. Then in the body, I addressed the five goals and gave examples from my work that showed how I improved in that area.

I feel prepared to go on to Comp II. In addition to all the papers I wrote in comp this semester, I also had a ten-page paper in philosophy class, we wrote on every chapter, and we'd e-mail him questions. In Western Civ., we wrote three papers and had three essay questions on each of the five tests.

I love writing. I'm thinking of majoring in something with writing, maybe journalism. I think I would like to have my own magazine eventually. I journal on my own at home; I started doing this in basketball where I'd do an everyday accomplishments kind of deal. I'm thinking about writing for the college paper here. I would've liked to write for the paper in high school, but we didn't have one.

I knew I liked writing in the third grade. The teacher would allow us to make creative little books and pamphlets, so I'd write little story books like Curious George, and she'd put them up on a table and show people. Even now I like to write stories. Now that I think about it, I know I'm going to major in English when I transfer to a state university.

**Teresa's student – Steve Nesbit****Academic background**

I graduated from high school in May 2006, and started at [Darby] in the fall of 2006. I'm just trying to get my AA degree and then I plan on transferring to [Clarke] State. Right now I'm trying to decide between two majors: physical education or physical therapist. If I choose physical education, I'd like to go into secondary education, with junior high at the lowest.

In high school, I took the required English courses; we had English 1 for freshman, English 2 for sophomores, Comp I for juniors, and Comp II for seniors. We did a research paper in high school; mine was on the death penalty. I always enjoyed writing; it was one of the more easier classes for me. My favorite subject, though, was physical education.

**Defining reflection**

Reflection to me is in the past. It's something that stood out as something important or bad. Reflection in writing is more open-ended. If a teacher says it's going to be a reflection paper, you can express more of yourself. If you write about an event that happened to you, you're reflecting on your past. Research papers are nice, but when you can write about something that happened to you or someone you know, you can get a lot more into it, and I think I do better. There could be some reflection in a research paper if you pick a topic that's somewhat related to something that you've done in the past.

### **Incorporating reflection**

I wrote a remembered event paper in Comp I on my high school graduation, and I thought that was the easiest paper to write. For peer review, you'd come in with your rough draft, you'd exchange it with two other people and they'd read yours and you'd read theirs and they'd comment; they'd mark on your paper based on all your mistakes and spelling errors. The instructor would give you credit for handing in your final draft, the rough draft and the three evaluations; she'd give you points for all of those.

I think this process was helpful because when I first started writing, I was really nervous and I didn't want anyone to read what I had written—except the teacher. This process loosens you up and it gets you to understand how other people think and act because you read their papers in group activities, so you're more likely to share. Sharing my paper the second time was a little easier, and by the third paper, I was just handing it out to whoever wanted to read it. There was another kid in class that I went to high school with so we kind of knew each other and we traded papers the first time.

I'd say the peer advice that I got was more just trying to fill up paper and say good things about you. The comments were okay, but if they were too extreme, like "this paper's perfect," then those were kind of—you knew the reviewer didn't really know what they were doing. Other than those, the other peer evaluations seemed to always give you good feedback. I tried to incorporate some of their comments into my final draft.

We didn't do journals in class, but we did do an interview paper. I wrote mine about a place; the stadium at [Clarke] State. I wrote about the building, the stadium, the history; how it got its name and some of the memorable events that have happened there.

When we had to compile our portfolio and write the reflective letter, I wouldn't say it was hard, and it wasn't busy work, it was just time-consuming because you had to put a lot into it. You had to reflect on all the competencies that you had learned throughout the semester. It wasn't hard; it just took a little while. You had to make sure everything looked good.

One of the competencies I wrote about was the MLA format, and doing a research paper and not getting fooled by certain sites. In high school, we worked with MLA in 9<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grades. You could use Google and Yahoo search engines, but they preferred that you used others.

I think people reflect on things all the time. I know you can't learn everything you need to learn just doing reflection, but it's one of the better ways to learn things. I think if other teachers assigned reflection papers, it would probably be helpful, but the students in those classes wouldn't want to do it because they'd not be in a comp class, so you'd get bad feedback from the students.

### **Hannah's student – Hilary Johnson**

#### **Academic background**

I graduated from a large, urban high school in May of '06. I'm a freshman here at [Darby] Community College with a Fashion Merchandising major. My classes this semester are Comp I, speech, psych, Intro to Computer, and Fashion Analysis. I'm in the Partnership Program with [Clarke] State University (CSU) and I live in a dorm on [Clarke's] campus. I take all my classes on the [Kennedy] campus of [Darby], except for my Intro to Computer class which I take at [Darby's] campus in [Richmond], which is in the same town as CSU.

In high school, I took four years of English, and I like writing persuasive essays. In the past, I've worked at two retail stores in the mall, as a hostess at a restaurant, and now I work at a daycare, which is located in the elementary school.

### **Defining reflection**

Reflection is reading over the essay you wrote and reflecting on how you feel about it or about what you wrote in the essay.

### **Incorporating reflection**

In class we change things according to the instructor's comments. In my childhood obesity paper, she suggested I not spend so much time telling why television is good because that goes against what I was trying to say in my paper, which is that television helps to cause obesity.

We also do peer responses, but I don't think they help very much. They're not taken seriously, so it's just kind of something you have to do. You do it really fast, and I don't think the peer comments were that great. The instructor's comments are good, but I don't get much out of the peer comments.

Since we're in a computer lab, we edit on the computer. I like it a lot, and I think it's a lot easier to read. They can just change your comments right on the document. The technology is no big deal to our class; no one is really struggling with it. Although we have a sheet to follow that tells us what to focus on, there's really no set rules. It's more like your own opinion of what you think they should work on or if they've done good [sic].

Even though I haven't finished my final portfolio, we did one at mid-term. I like having everything together on a disc in case I need it for a job interview or something like



that. I didn't know how to do this before, linking everything together, but it wasn't complicated.

We didn't do any journals in this class, but we did a lot of journals in high school. I did one called "Creative Writing." In this journal, we would write stories and then our teacher would make comments and suggestions to make my story better. Before I wrote the next story, I would always go back to the journal to check her suggestions.

In this class, we wrote an informative paper, which was on why MySpace is bad for children; a profile, which was on [Darby's] personal trainer; and a persuasive paper, which was on childhood obesity. When we would hand in the complete draft (what she called the rough draft), we would write a reflection in class to hand in with the draft. Then when we handed in the final draft, we wrote a reflection in class on the difference between the complete draft and the final draft. For example, on my reflection for the complete draft, the instructor mentioned how I needed to state my claims better, and so in my reflection I wrote how I could change it to make it sound more like a persuasive paper.

I can tell a big difference from last year to this year in the improvement of my papers and how I'm more comfortable with writing papers. I think this is because of the emphasis on reflection. Now I know not to use *you* and I know the appropriate places to put commas. I think if I tried to use the word *you*, I would stop and catch myself.

### **Hannah's student – Ethan Roberts**

#### **Academic background**

I graduated from a large, urban high school in the same town as [Darby] Community College in May 06. This is my first semester of college and I'm taking Intro to Business,

Comp I, the College Experience, and Arithmetic. My major is Business Management. In high school, I took the regular English classes and advanced composition my senior year. That class was a lot like this comp class, but it wasn't as detailed. We wrote at least four papers, probably a few more.

I currently work at Target in the electronics department. I plan on staying at [Darby] Community College for two years and then transfer to [Clarke] State University.

### **Defining reflection**

Reflection is what you remember. When we wrote a paper on a snapshot, we had to reflect on the snapshot. My snapshot was of my 7<sup>th</sup> birthday and I was standing next to my dad's new Bronco truck. I remembered that all my relatives were there and how happy I was. My dad had just gotten the truck that week and I was happy for him.

### **Incorporating reflection**

We were in a computer lab for our class, but we used peer editing by sending our papers to other people and having them make comments on our papers. I sometimes made changes based on their comments. Sometimes, I disagreed with their comments. It was hard to be an editor, especially on the snapshot paper, because it's their remembrance of when they were young, and it's kind of hard to comment on that on some stranger's paper.

We wrote a position paper on whether television was bad for children. I said that it was because there was more evidence to support why it was harmful for children. When we edited that paper, I felt a little more comfortable because I knew the subject since we all researched the same subject.

One of our other reflective assignments was to answer some reflective questions. I didn't really learn much out of the deal because they were obvious questions. Most of the other students didn't find them helpful either. If we answered "no," we had to explain why we answered this way.

I'm working on my reflective letter; I'm halfway done, but you're supposed to have your portfolio done before you write the letter. We did an electronic version of the portfolio at mid-term, and then I am working on a print version where I have to print out each paper I did through the course of the whole semester. In my opinion, the electronic one is easier to create, but the paper one is probably easier to read. The paper one is more time consuming to create.

When I was printing out my papers, I read most of my peer comments that I hadn't really looked at on WebCT. I noticed that I wasn't too strong at writing a paper at the beginning of the semester, but I can see improvement. I understand the reflective letter assignment; it's just hard to find evidence and examples in your paper and then cite it back to what page number it was on in your portfolio. It's time consuming to put the portfolio together with the page numbers, and then you have to flip through your whole portfolio and find the right piece. The point of the letter is reflection over your past papers over the semester. The instructor didn't really tell us an order to put the papers in, but I knew that I needed to organize it somehow or it would be a mess. I think I'll start my reflective letter with the most recent paper I wrote because it's fresh in my mind.

Regarding doing the portfolio as a final exam, I'm about half and half on that. I know most of the kids don't think it's probably educational to do a whole portfolio because they

probably won't learn anything from it. It's not like they're going to go back and look at it and say, "Oh, my. I did good on this or bad on that."

### **Hannah's student – Rebecca Kirkpatrick**

#### **Academic background**

I grew up in a small town and graduated in a class of 23, and I'm a sophomore here at [Darby] Community College. I'm currently taking Composition I, psychology, and public speaking. I'm an Early Childhood Education major and I should have my Associate of Science degree by the end of the summer. I work in a home daycare and I baby-sit a lot.

In high school, I took the required English classes and I was on my school newspaper as a reporter. I enjoy writing, but it probably depends on what I have to write about. I also took advanced comp in high school, and I thought it was interesting. When we wrote for the paper, we usually wrote about sports or what was going on in our school or community, and we usually wrote the story together with a partner.

#### **Defining reflection**

I agree with [Ethan]; reflection is what you remember. My snapshot was of my sister who was adopted from Korea; I was eleven and she was four months. I thought it would be nice to write about her.

#### **Incorporating reflection**

I found the peer edit comments helpful, and sometimes I made changes based on them. I was uncomfortable being an editor because they basically knew who was grading it,

so I didn't want to go too in-depth about it, but I tried to make little comments here and there. I would have been more comfortable making comments if it had been anonymous.

When we created our mid-term portfolio on the CD, I didn't like working on the computer hyperlinking all those links. I didn't like that at all; I would prefer to do the paper portfolio over the electronic one.

I understand the reflective letter assignment, but I haven't started on it yet. I have only printed out the first half of the semester's papers. I'm already signed up for Comp II; it will be a bit of a change because I'm not that great of a writer, so I might struggle a little bit.

### **Profiles of the Readers**

*Sound, consistent and uniform standards are admirable, and maybe even workable, when we're talking about, say, the manufacture of DVD players. The process of trying to gauge [college students'] understanding of ideas is a very different matter. It necessarily entails the exercise of human judgment which is a messy, imprecise, subjective affair. (Wilson, 2006, p. xii)*

### **Christie Cumming**

#### **Academic background**

I started my undergrad degree when I sent my daughter off to college. She came here to [Darby], and I decided that I wanted to further my education so I went to [Sanderson] and spent a few years trying to figure out what I wanted to be when I grew up. I changed my major several times, but finally decided on communication (although I was only one class away from a major in business and a major in religion). Then I started my Master's program at a private college that had a human resource specialist, which is what my career is in. Once I got my master's, I thought, "Okay, I'm done," but then a friend stopped by my office with

some information on a Ph.D. program at [Clarke] State called OLHRD, which stands for Organizational Learning and Human Resource Development.

The information sat on my bulletin board for a couple of weeks and every day I was looking at it and I thought I grew up in a family where education wasn't a big deal and my father repeatedly told me how stupid I was, so to go for my Ph.D. was far beyond my comprehension. One day, though, curiosity got the better of me and I phoned the number and spent an hour talking to a gentleman who turned out to be the head of the program. I had used some of his work in my master's thesis, so we talked some more. That was the end of May in 1997, and by that August, I was enrolled in the program.

There were 12 of us in the program and I was the only practicing HR person, and the first night the professor told us we needed to be thinking about our dissertation. I did and built off something from my thesis; the working title for my dissertation was Vulture Culture: The Effects of Narcissism within an Organization. Our group of students helped with the research for his next book, which was a take-off on the yellow brick road. My chapter was called "Don't Touch my Toto"; it was based on values, the ethics within an organization, how we have to deal with those in order to influence change. I had 16 hours in the program when my company was acquired by another company. Up until that time, all my education had been paid for 100%; however, when the new owners came in, the culture changed and I knew I would not be successful in that kind of atmosphere, so I left. That meant that I also left my educational package, and then I found out that I was going to be a grandmother.

I had spent ten years as a human resources director before the company changed hands, but right after I got my undergraduate degree, I started out as a consultant. I had my own business and I consulted for that company. Then I told them that I wanted to go back to

school and the owners suggested I work for them full-time and go to school. I worked as their administrative assistant for a year, and then I became the director. We had 148 employees with 12 nationalities. We linked up with the refugee bureau, so any time a new immigrant population came to the state, the woman at the bureau would call and say, “I have a translator, are you needing anyone?” We would teach them job skills and social skills, which enlarged my cultural diversity immensely. The company manufactures automotive, after-market, convenience products – fuzzy dice, license frames, that kind of stuff.

I got into teaching through the company. I had an English instructor who noticed that when I got involved in a class, I read everything, the history, the time frame, the author’s life, what he was going through, all of it. Then we had a supervisor at the company who wanted to get her GED, so I hooked her up at [Darby], and in that process, one night the instructor asked if she could bring her class to see the manufacturing plant and if I would talk to the class about safety since I was certified through OSHA. He started bringing classes each semester and finally one night, I told him that I would enjoy teaching. He connected me with the department head and I began teaching Supervision at [Darby].

Now I’ve taught leadership, marketing, human resources, advertising, and personal finance at six different colleges, in addition to [Darby]. My full-time position is a part-time teacher. I would just as soon land at [Darby] because I would like to be a full-time teacher.

### **Defining reflection**

Reflection is looking back and making sense. Reflection is “okay, I’ve learned this and maybe I liked it, maybe I didn’t,” but you start pulling everything together. It’s also got an analytical aspect to it.

### **Incorporating reflection**

After I read the letters and on my drive home from the reading, I was thinking about how much reflection in writing is like journaling. In some of my classes, I've had students journaling with the idea of looking at here's where I started, here are my struggles, or here are my strengths, and this is where I am now; it's that cognitive pulling together. I think it helps students stop and say, "You know, I really learned something."

I've used journaling in my personal finance class where they chronicled how they felt when they spent, was it an impulse purchase, did they have post-purchase remorse. In advertising, I asked them how much awareness they had of ads; they were to keep a log and note what billboards they noticed or TV ads and how they felt about them and did they act on the ads, etc. I didn't get thoughtful responses until the end. Usually when a student starts in the class, there's always that trepidation of I-don't-want-to-share-too-much-of-myself or this is silly, but as they progress through the course, you can see some growth, there's some connection.

I use journaling with my leadership class at the [Darby] campus [in the town] where the largest manufacturing plant just closed and laid off a lot of workers. I ask them what leadership means to them, and they've got to get through some of that hostility. Almost every class you deal with it, so by allowing them to write, it helps. I always tell them that this is confidential and if you want to share, it's fine, if not, that's fine too. I'm not looking at spelling, but what I'm looking for is the connection and whether they've confronted any of their fears.



**Reader training**

The first time I trained I was scared to death because I am not an English instructor. As a business instructor, however, I am concerned about the writing level of [Darby] students when they go out into the business world. I wanted to see what it was like on the other side. During the training, I was pleased that I scored like the other English instructors.

I was trained before the first reading which was last fall, so actually I've read the reflection letters twice, first for the small pilot and now for the district-wide assessment. The training was sufficient; I don't feel like I missed anything, I caught right on and was very comfortable.

One of the reasons I went to the training was to find out what kind of assignments the comp teachers were giving. In each class I teach, the students have to do some sort of project and if I can get it so they understand why they're writing this or why they need MLA, I want to support the English teachers. I'm a big fan of referencing another class.

**Recognizing reflection**

The first time I read the letters, I could go through them very quickly because they were not as intense. I don't feel the students gave it as much thought as I saw in the second reading where you could see a marked difference in what the student had been through. They were actually starting to put that thought process together, they were writing where they had been and where they are now. The second time was definitely much more thorough. The second time I spent more time flipping to the cited page numbers in the portfolio. I'm looking at the MLA structure.

I'm a little disheartened in the portfolios. Creating the portfolios is a professional thing they're supposed to do; it's supposed to look nice. I really stress in every class I teach that I have something that's going to be turned in, make it look nice. Just take that extra five minutes because if I get a bent up old [Clarke] State 3-ring binder that looks like it's been in a fire, I'm not going to put my time, my quality into reading that. I see some of these portfolios come back and I'm thinking if that went to your boss . . . If you don't care enough about how that's presented why should I care what's in there? I have to be cautious when I'm reading because I tend to say if they just throw this whole ratty folder at me, what does that say about their quality? I know it's a judgment thing; it's that first impression.

Regarding my experience as a reader, one thing sticks out. When you read the letters, some of them you just know are phony. It's the old brown-nosing effect, but you can really tell the ones that are heartfelt because they admit they came into this not knowing, and they still don't know. However, now they know that they don't know, and I thought, "Now that's a person who understands." I don't know what grade they got in the class, but somebody learned something, and reading those is always a pleasure. One letter from a female discussed her struggles with writing and she said now that I know what I don't know, I will continue to read and be aware of it. It was her increased awareness that impressed me.

When I read one that I felt was actually being honest and reflecting, I felt like my scores were a bit higher. Even though it may not be the best writing, she may not have put the comma or the semicolon in the right place, but she knew what she was not doing; that is important.

I also liked the letters where the students had an understanding of their strengths and weaknesses. They have to be able to do some self-analysis in the business world; we call that

a SWOT analysis. SWOT stands for strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. I use a SWOT analysis in every course I teach, and we could adapt this to a writing situation. A threat could be their fear of writing, the emotional part of it. They're going to take that out in the workplace, and you have to be able to write in the workplace.

I had a third grade instructor who, when she was standing in front of the blackboard (and mind you this was a real blackboard) helping us to practice our letters, said if someone can not read your handwriting, then you are not communicating. I still use that today in my classes. When you go out into the business world, you've got to make yourself heard, you've got to make people aware of you; you need communication, and if we can't read your handwriting, you're not communicating.

### **Reader responsibility**

Being a reader charged with evaluating reflective writing brings with it a great deal of responsibility, not only to the student, but to the college as well. As a business instructor, I'm trying to incorporate the 21<sup>st</sup> century work skills into each of my classes, but when I see the writing skills of some of my students, I'm shocked. The comp letters that I read were of a much higher-level skill than my business students. I don't know if that's because they think, well in the business world, this doesn't apply. I just got a paper last week that was incomprehensible. They were given an article on global manners to analyze, but this poor student couldn't even understand the article. There was no comprehension. By being a reader and looking at what the English department is doing, I can go back to my business classes and say we need to do this, we need to be working on this; it just helps me overall.

**Tasha Jones****Academic background**

I have a bachelor's degree in psychology and I have undergraduate minors in sociology and child development. My master's degree is in sociology and I'm currently ABD in rural sociology. Rural sociology is housed in the College of Agriculture at [Clarke] State; my areas of specialization are going to be in social change and development and social psychology. All of my degrees are from [Clarke], but I started at a community college, and I've taken several graduate courses here and there at other schools. For my dissertation, I'm looking at the use of technology in rural school systems and trying to determine whether or not administrative style makes a difference in the adoption and implementation of computer technology.

I have been teaching for roughly 13 years; that includes the time that I spent as a teaching assistant when I first started my Master's degree at [Clarke]. I have taught in just about every kind of institution that you can think of. I have taught at public and private four-year and two-year colleges; I have taught at satellite campuses that specialize in teaching the adult student; I have taught at Christian colleges, at state-funded universities; just about every scenario you can think of, I have taught there.

Most often, I teach the intro. level soc. class, and once in awhile, I teach social problems; courtship, marriage and family; and when I teach upper division courses, most often I teach research methods and history.

I don't really have a preference for the type of school I teach in, but the most important thing to me is administrative style. I would say, though, that my preference is

probably for the private, four-year, liberal arts college. I function best in that setting, but I will say that I enjoy just about any teaching as long as I have a supportive administration.

When I get my Ph.D., I'd love to say my plan is to go find a tenure-track teaching job at a four-year liberal arts college, but I got married this summer and my husband loves his K-12 teaching job and we are a long drive from any private, four-year school. He loves his job so much, and I know how important it is to like your job, and I hate to take that away from him, so I really hate to say that I might be a professional adjunct, but I might be. I like being an adjunct; I like the flexibility and I think that also in terms of having a family, I think it might be nice if at least one of us had a flexible job, and so I guess I wouldn't mind being a professional adjunct.

### **Defining reflection**

When I think of reflection, I think of looking back and going over something, and also I'd include some component of evaluation. A reflective practitioner asks questions like what was good about that, what was bad about that, and what do I want to take with me as I move forward? I guess for me reflection would have a component of evaluation and also a resourcefulness, too; how can I use my past as a resource?

I never thought expressly of the term reflection as it applies to writing until last Saturday at the reading or last Wednesday when we had our organizational meeting and training. It's not that I didn't do it, I just don't think I ever used the term reflection; I guess I've always used the term revising. I know that is incorporating reading what you'd written before and taking what was good and getting rid of what was bad, but I'd never really come to reflection before.

### **Incorporating reflection**

As an instructor, I don't use rubrics, but I have used them when I've been forced into it. Rubrics were new to me when I started teaching full time at the community college level. There just seemed to be a real focus on rubrics for everything, so from then on, I just made an effort with every single assignment I designed, I'd have a cute little rubric that went along with it. That way, I could justify the grades I had given. Really, the rubrics that I designed aren't any different from the criteria I used to give in assignments for the first ten years I was teaching; the only difference is now the guidelines are cuter than they used to be.

Reading the letters was helpful. I'm always interested in how other colleges and other disciplines measure learning, so that part was interesting, and it was also interesting for me to see how students supported the fact that they thought they had learned something. You know, I have learned X and here is evidence of it. However, part of what I wondered is whether or not students fully understood what that letter was supposed to contain because there were some letters that were just awful, but yet the portfolios looked pretty good, and yet we weren't to judge the portfolios. There were other letters where someone had definitely mastered the art of writing a business letter, but I questioned whether or not they had mastered the art of the research paper in MLA format. I think that, all in all, it was just interesting to see how students supported the fact that they had met these learning goals. I wondered too if I were to lay out my course competencies and say okay these are the things you were given the opportunity to learn, now give me an example, I wondered in my head what the letters for an Intro to Sociology class might look like.

Regarding reflective practice as a teacher, I don't have them keep journals because a lot of the classes I teach online come to me pre-packaged and so a lot of what I teach comes

handed to me. They say here's what you'll do for the next 8 weeks or 15 weeks; here's your syllabus, here's your assignment, go plug in your phone number, plug in your name, plug in the hours and times you desire to be called; in those classes, I don't have a lot of choice.

I don't incorporate reflection as much as application where part of the assignment might be to think about how you've been affected by such and such concept. I do, however, give my students general advice about writing papers. One time when I was in graduate school, I mentioned to one of my professors that I felt guilty because he gave us a week to work on the exam and invariably I would save it to the last couple of days, and just sit down and write it in one setting. He told me that 80% of my time should be spent looking out the window and 20% of my time should be spent writing a paper. I tell my students now: "Here's your assignment. You figure out how much time you're going to dedicate to this and then take that times .8 and spend that much time looking out the window thinking about it, and then spend the rest of the time putting those thoughts on paper."

That comment of his made me feel less guilty, and it made me realize that a lot of the writing process, you can call it reflection if you want – I call it looking out the window, but thinking is just as much a part of the writing process as is putting words to paper.

I notice I do more of this when I teach an upper division class, but for instance, I'm currently teaching a 400 level theory class at a four-year, liberal arts campus this semester, and on day one (because this class lasts just eight weeks – it meets two times a week for 2 ½ hours), I give them everything on the first day. Here's your midterm, here is your final, here is your first paper assignment and your second paper assignment; they just look at me like "how in the world am I going to do all this?" I tell them that I do it for a reason; since our time is limited, I want you to have this stuff and be able to read through it and think about

what you're going to write about. They're all very overwhelmed on the first night of class, and maybe the second night of class, but by last night, I had a student come up to me and say he'd been thinking about the midterm, which is good since it's due next week. He said this is what I want to do and he spoke his mid-term to me, and I said, "Go home and put that on paper and you're finished." Even though it seems like information overload, I think it's helpful in classes that are writing intensive to give them as much as you can up front.

### **Reader training**

Regarding the training session, I had absolutely no idea what I was getting into except that I have worked at [Darby] previously about ten years ago. For one year, I worked as an adjunct and this is my first experience back at [Darby]; I've been here for a year and a half, but I've worked completely online. I have absolutely no opportunity to meet other people who work here. The only person I know is the person who hired me and that's because we went to graduate school together.

I know nobody and I like to be involved in the campuses where I work, and most of the online teaching that I do is for colleges that are located all across the U.S., so I can't be actively involved. This presented an opportunity for me to be involved, for me to meet people, and plus get paid for my efforts. That was what drew me to the reader training. I guess I was also interested in the kind of data [Darby] collects; I looked at it from a research perspective. I wanted to know how they quantified learning, and I guess from a professional perspective I was most intrigued about the research aspect of it. I knew very little about what the English department might expect of me or of the student.



I thought the training was very helpful. I'm glad I had the training rather than just walking in cold because while everyone would like to think that they are objective when it comes to grading and evaluating, it still helped to have a kind of debriefing time where we talked about what each of the scores meant. It also helped because we found on Wednesday at least one of the squares in the rubric didn't quite apply, and it helped to find out what other people were thinking. We talked about what it takes to meet Goal 1, Criteria 2, and what it takes to score a 4 in that area, and what it takes to score a 3. I think it helped to affirm that I was at least on the right track because I think most of my scores measured up with other people in the room, so I felt more comfortable going into Saturday's reading. I know that they had mentioned that this doesn't affect the student and it doesn't affect their grade, but at the same time, I wanted to feel like I was doing a service to the student.

I don't know that I would change anything about the training; I think the training was helpful. The evaluation process I think is fabulous, and I think, over time, as the criteria become clearer and this is done more routinely at [Darby], some of those problems are going to take care of themselves. Problems such as the instructor not being clear about what needs to be in the letter or the students not understanding what needs to be in the letter. I really don't know if there is a way to take care of the discrepancies, such as the really bad letters matched up with the really good portfolios. I don't know if there is a way to take care of that, especially if the letter is not made a part of the student's grade or if it's extra credit. If the student doesn't need the extra credit, what motivation is there? Even though it may not be a part of [Darby's] culture to say you absolutely have to do this in your class, maybe there needs to be an element of that if you want letters that match up with portfolios. All in all, though, I think it's a pretty good assessment mechanism.

**Recognizing reflection**

I could see real reflection in some of them most definitely. In some, you could tell that they had taken the time to go back through what they had learned and to really evaluate themselves because some of the letters were very honest. Some said here's what I learned and here's what I wish I could do better and others were overwhelmingly positive and said I am super wonderful at all five of these things now. Some were even more blunt; I read one where, I believe he signed his name to it; it was a young man who said this is absolutely ridiculous that [Darby] thinks I should learn MLA and I'm not going to. You won't find it in the portfolio and it's just absolutely ridiculous for me to learn to cite information.

I think I only saw maybe two letters that were completely lacking in reflection, in any element of reflection whatsoever. One of those wasn't even a letter; it was an essay that was lucky to have been  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a page long, and so in my mind, that person hadn't listened well enough to the directions to write it in the form of a letter, so they probably hadn't learned much anyway. There was another one that essentially summarized what the student thought they learned in the course, but really what it was a narrative-style teaching evaluation. "Dear Committee . . . Comp I taught me X. It would be helpful in college because of X," but there was absolutely no reference to course competencies. It reminded me of a course evaluation.

**Reader responsibility**

The way I interpret being a reader who evaluates reflective writing is, in short, to make sure students have adhered to the competencies for the particular class that I was evaluating and that they've met the competencies.

Prior to doing the reading, I might have used much the same criteria, but just put them in different words. I may not have used the term “competencies”; it’s called a bunch of different things—behavioral objectives or course outcomes. I guess it means the same thing except that [Darby] quantifies theirs with five specific objectives.

I thought the process was pretty self-explanatory and easy enough for a reader. I think that it was good that it was reiterated to us several times that this was not going to impact the students’ grades, and so that if we screwed up (whatever that might mean), it wasn’t going to have a direct impact on the student—that was important for me. Of course, if we screwed up, it made an impact somewhere because it would have made the research skewed, but I guess I was comforted knowing that no matter what I did, I wasn’t going to negatively impact an individual’s future—particularly an individual that I’d never met.

I’m not sure that I interpret the job or task of being a reader any differently in light of our first interview, which I think says something about my own reflective process. I guess I didn’t think much about the process of being a reader; I guess I reflected on other things. If I’m charged with the responsibility again, I’ll probably do it much the same way. I would guess that since I’m a part-time employee, there are people who are full-time employees who will probably be evaluating the rubric and seeing whether or not there needs to be changes made, but unless there is a different rubric in front of me, next time I’ll probably evaluate much the same way I did the first time.

The one thing that I took away is that I probably need to spend more time talking about documentation and documentation style primarily because in sociology we use a different format that’s not taught in Comp I courses. We use ASA and usually students are taught MLA or APA, but when students come to my class, they absolutely, positively, have

to use ASA—no exceptions. Most of them have never heard of it, so the one thing I learned is that I probably need to do additional training in ASA format so that students are familiar with it. Formatting seems to be difficult for students anyway.

I think that the more we can drive the point home about why we cite and why it's important to cite and why it's important to cite correctly, and the different philosophical reasonings behind the differences in MLA, APA, ASA, the better it will be. I think that part of grasping the formatting is related to what motivates the student because some students are motivated to learn and those kind of students you can probably appeal to them by telling them the philosophical differences, but there are other students who may be very good students, and they might get very good grades, but their motivation is what do I need to do to get the A, not what do I need to do to learn the material. So if they're very menu-driven and you give them a list, they can follow that list; they may not have learned it, but they might have done well enough.

The more I think about it, the more I think that I just use a different vocabulary than the humanities folks do. This morning when I was giving students a preview as to what their mid-term exam would be like, I said I'm going to ask for application, which in essence, is a reflection. I'm simply asking them to remember what they learned about community theory and then apply that to a community situation that they're aware of; in that process, they're going to have to do some reflection, but I never once used that term.

**Rita Lewis****Academic background**

My undergraduate degree is from University of [Frankfort]. I have a B.A. in English literature and my minor was women's studies and I focused on creative writing; I did my honor's thesis on creative non-fiction writing. I have a master's in fine arts and creative writing from a university in New Orleans. My focus was non-fiction and I graduated last May.

My first year in my master's program, I worked as a tutor in the writing center, and then I taught composition for two years. I was slated to teach four sections of comp in the fall of 2005, but the hurricane happened, so I evacuated, moved here, and did my classes online. When I returned to school in the spring, I taught my classes online. I started teaching here at [Darby] in August, and I taught four sections of Comp I last fall.

Regarding online classes, I think for very young students, it's better to be face-to-face. Ideally, I like the face-to-face computer-aided class because you can incorporate the elements of online that work really well, but also when they're confused, you can see their confused little faces and you can register where they're not getting it. With online, it's very distant, and I thought it was a lot to ask freshmen to take because they have to be so responsible and disciplined in their work. I think it's inevitable that Comp I classes are going to be online, so I think it's fine, but I think it's a little better to be in a face-to-face class.

**Defining reflection**

I would define reflection as the first step in being self-critical or understanding yourself. As you start to gather information, you think, "I'm going to step back, think about

what I've done, think about why I've done it," and once you do that, you become more self-aware of your motivations and how your process works in anything.

I participated in the Comp I assessment as an instructor with four sections, and I attended the reader training and the reading session. [As a result, sometimes Rita thinks of reflection as an instructor and sometimes she thinks of it as a reader.] With reflection in writing, there are so many ways that students can reflect. For example, are they reflecting on their own writing, are they being self-critical of the writing—thinking about how they understood the process, or are they reflecting on some sort of subject, or reflecting on their life? For example, if they are writing a narrative essay, they may be thinking back about a story they just lived. I guess there are two aspects to this. This study is focused on reflection and how students reflect on their own writing. I think in this sense with Comp I students, it's the first step in asking them to just stop and think, "Oh, I'm actually writing something; I'm not doing this without preconceived notions; I'm not doing this in a vacuum; I'm not doing this because it's an assignment. I think it's sort of the first step in opening up their eyes to reflective writing as a process and it requires thinking, critical thinking.

Since our last interview, I've been thinking about the question that asked what reflection is. I was reading a paper and the student just jumped right into the assignment; they didn't explain the context or what they were writing for, they simply said, "I'm going to compare two things"—I don't even know if they said that. I thought, well, yes, it's okay in the sense that as an instructor I asked you to do that, that is your assignment, and in theory, I know what you're talking about and you know what you're talking about. What I'm thinking about is how to get him to stop doing that, how to get him to state an introduction, and I'm thinking that it's a matter of reflection. With reflection, you have to look at your writing as if

you were another person. When I read it as a teacher, I look as if I were not the teacher, but a whole other person; a person who doesn't understand what is going on. When you see writing that way, you can make better writing because you're thinking of other people. This relates to reflection because reflection is looking at yourself in the mirror. However, that is just your reflection, so what you do when you do that process is you step out of yourself and look at another person which is yourself.

I think that the mirror analogy is that when we look at the world, we see it from the inside of our bodies, but when you look at a reflection, you're seeing it from the outside of your body. We try to get students to look at their writing outside of their body, outside of their own head.

### **Incorporating reflection**

I teach a profile assignment that requires some reflecting because I want them to not only think about the person they're looking at and writing about, but also how they perceive the person they're writing about. Throughout my class, I'm always trying to get them to think not only about the thing we are writing about, but why we think what we do, and why we think that way as a culture, but I guess that's more analysis. Reflection, for me, sort of goes throughout the semester; I ask them to reflect on their ideas and where they come from. We try to break everything down.

The next time I teach this assignment, I'm going to try to get students to start reflecting on the goals of the course throughout the semester as opposed to just cramming it in at the end of the semester. In addition, I guess I want to give them more time to write it; I don't want it to be rushed like I felt they rushed it last semester. I assigned it as a take-home

and I gave them a week; although there weren't that many points assigned to it, I was pretty happy with the way the students did.

As a teacher, I like the assignment as a tool because I think reading those letters as a final assignment gave me a lot of insight into how I was teaching; it was like getting my course evaluations early.

I think the hardest thing is to teach, and the whole goal of college is to get kids to start thinking critically. While I was disappointed that I didn't see a lot of critical thinking in the letter, I sort of think that this is the first step in either a four-year or a two-year process to get kids to even accept the idea that critical thinking is useful and powerful and something that they'll do every single day.

In getting them to think critically about their writing, they have to think, "Well, this is a choice and I do have these choices." When I teach my class, I always want them to know that nothing matters as much as good writing, so however you get at good writing, that's fine with me. I hope this helps them to think critically about what good writing is and if they are creating good writing.

As an instructor, I've never used a rubric. For me, every piece of writing is so different, and each essay that students sit down to write has its own goals and its own everything, so as soon as you start making a rubric, then you start having to make so many exceptions. I like to think of my grading style as organic, but some of my students think of it as wishy-washy.

To get them to look outside of their body, I would use peer review workshops, but since my students all have the same assignment, they can't necessarily create that stranger to look at things. To do this, maybe it's a matter of giving them an assignment that they've



never seen before written by a student who doesn't provide any real context, and ask, "What's the problem with this?" The more I think about this, the more I like this whole out-of-body essay because you have to try to get them out of the body of the composition class also.

Writing is really hard and teaching it is really hard, so I guess you have to like hard things, which I do, but there is just so much to think about. You have to be able to look at yourself as a stranger or look at your writing as a stranger, and you have to keep stepping back away from your writing in the context, and analyze it to see if it is working.

As a teacher, I want to have access to assessment because we expect students to have certain skills when they come to [Darby]. We don't expect them to have great skills because it's such a diverse population. We have some students who write well already, students who have had a lot of practice, students who haven't written in ten years, those who have never written at all, it's hard to figure out what expectations to have. It might be useful to do this sort of assessment when they come into a composition classroom because in theory, the students coming in will stay the same; they will average the same. But then ideally, as the years go on and this process gets refined and how we teach composition gets better, their end results will be better based on these goals, and teaching these goals, and assessing these goals.

Testing is a funny animal; it depends on what skills the assessors are looking for. The person reading the COMPASS test of a student who's been in prison for 20 years and who had forgotten that he needs to capitalize the first letter of a sentence might score that student just fine if the scorer isn't looking for skills in capitalization. Even a student with fantastic grammar might not show any critical thinking or they might not have any concept of

audience or they might have really boring sentences. It's hard to grade a paper like this. Of course it's subjective and you can tell the student that you're grading on grammar and content, but it could be really lame and you can't write "Your paper was lame." It's so frustrating. I tell my students the things I'm grading on and I tell them that I can't grade on lameness, but please don't bore me. Don't bore me and don't bore yourselves and don't bore your peers. Reflection might help with this. Think, "Was I just sitting back and following the steps and making it boring" or "Where was I going with this?"

I like for my class to be as open as possible, and I tell them that all I want them to be able to do is write well, and however they do that is fine by me. Good writing is about communicating. On the first or second day, we talk about what good writing is and how do you get there, so at least they have this idea that they're going to have to start assessing themselves. I like to think of the process as organic because I'm telling them that our big goal is to communicate.

Regarding peer reviews, one of the frustrations I have is how to get them to not be so kind to one another . . . not be so easy on each other. I try to make my class really, really comfortable, and I've noticed that the smaller the class is, the more comfortable they are with each other.

### **Reader training**

I attended the training session in November and the whole thing seemed very natural to me because at the university where I taught, we did calibration. The entire department would send samples of student essays from different courses and then everyone was asked to read them, and then we'd all come together and discuss them to try to make sure that

everyone was going to grade consistently. We'd spend an hour on this process and there were usually around 40 people there. We'd each grade the samples separately and then raise our hands during the session and then we'd talk about the outliers.

At our training here, it seemed sensible to read the letters and discuss them, but I was a little frustrated by how far off topic it went. I felt like it wasn't very valuable for me. While I'm interested in the rubric and how it can be fine-tuned, I don't think that's why you wanted me there. Otherwise, I thought the process was very efficient.

Regarding the formatting of the letters, I guess those things really didn't bother me as a reader because that's not something you're asking me to focus on. There's no section on the rubric for the format; I don't think that's what you really care about.

### **Recognizing reflection**

At the reading session, I was eager to read the letters. I was eager to see what students had written, how they'd reflected, and what they said, but I guess I didn't see very much reflection in the letters that I got. I was kind of bored reading them because I wanted to see the students thinking about writing because I'm interested in seeing the students thinking about their writing process, but I just didn't see very much reflection. I sort of saw students going through the motions. I thought the process was efficient, and I thought it was kind of interesting to be sitting in a room with a group of people all doing that kind of reading. So I guess it was a positive experience and I learned a lot, you know, how I'd like to teach the assignment or how to revise teaching the assignment.

The letters that bored me were the ones where they would state the goals. The first goal is to learn about writing as a recursive process and they would sort of touch on that idea.

Recursive means drafting for them—that’s how they would define it—and they would say “I wrote two drafts” and that would be it. There wouldn’t be any thinking about *why* I would write the drafts; just recursive means drafts and I wrote two drafts. I just learned a new word and that’s what I’m going to do now or not do now. The funniest one I read said I know what recursive writing means, but it doesn’t work for me; I don’t like it so I’m not going to do it. I thought that was a tricky one because they understand it, but they don’t agree with it. If you don’t agree with it that means you’ve thought about it. I know there’s a lot that goes into the rubric, but I thought am I supposed to be looking for if they understand it or are we indoctrinating them to believe it?

I noticed that I’m getting the same sort of writing in my peer reviews as I did in my essays, which is very lacking in critical thinking. They say things like, “This is a really good essay,” “I really liked it—maybe you could talk more about your mom.”

Whenever I get discouraged about their unwillingness to really think, I tell myself that they don’t know how to think; this is what I’m teaching them. I have the first chance of teaching a concept that is part of a four-year or two-year process; I’m the first person to get them and even open their minds to the possibility of critical thinking. Learning how to think in college is the most important thing. However, I didn’t figure this out until after college. I was like, “Oh, so that’s what they were teaching me with this liberal arts education.” It seemed like an awful lot of analysis, but what I was really learning, secretly, was critical thinking.

There’s so much content in the world. The reflection, the whole assessment, the letter and the process—I don’t think it’s going to solve this problem; I don’t think it will make them critical thinkers. I think it’s chipping away . . . I think it’s a good start, but I don’t want

to get myself into a higher expectation that, by the end of this class, they're going to be thinkers—that's just not realistic. I just want to see that little flicker in the eye, then I'm happy.

### **Reader responsibility**

To be a reader means that you have to understand the goals or requirements that [Darby] wants students of Composition I to have. You have to put your personal feelings about the quality of writing aside and work at, I don't want to say being a cog in a wheel, but you sort of have to be kind of a part of the machine. You have to be less individual and more like a uniform brain. What it means in general is that you're part of a team that is trying to do this "scientific" study, so that you have to be a little bit more uniform; you have to sort of understand where this hypothesis is going. For me personally, what it means to be a reader is to think critically about the goals of composition and how I can teach them. I like that there are goals for the whole course; I like that there are goals and not requirements because I can teach them however I want, and they're goals that I had already for my students, but I like that they're articulated.

### **Conclusion**

While reading these profiles, it became evident that all of the instructors (the four composition instructors, the business instructor, and the sociology instructor) were passionate about teaching. By nature, they were reflective practitioners and, when given an opportunity to reflect on their practice, they were quite introspective. While some criticism of the assessment process emerged, most of the instructors and readers viewed it as a valuable, but

difficult, endeavor. All agreed that some students were capable of demonstrating the ability to reflect in their final reflective letter.

The student profiles revealed the broad diversity of community college students. From a security guard to a daycare worker and from a Target electronics employee to the owner of a laser-optic service company, the students covered the employment spectrum. All nine of the students were employed and all were full-time students; several had attended other schools before coming to [Darby] and most planned on continuing their education elsewhere. While some of the students loved to write and others found it a chore, most agreed that their writing ability improved over the course of the semester.

## **CHAPTER 5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

The purpose of this case study was to seek to understand the nature of reflection in writing assessment. In this chapter, I present the findings from the analysis of the data obtained in the study. The data were comprised of interviews with community college writing instructors, their students, and the trained readers who participated in a new, holistically-scored portfolio course evaluation program at a Midwestern community college. In addition, content analysis was conducted on 262 reflective letters from the student portfolios in the program. Discussion of existing literature as it is related to the themes is included. The findings are categorized into the following nine emergent themes: (1) reflection as auto-response; (2) reflection as cognitive development; (3) reflection as conversation; (4) reflection as opportunity; (5) reflection as pedagogy; (6) reflection as real-world skills; (7) reflection as responsibility; (8) reflection as resistance; and (9) reflection as understanding. These nine over-arching themes include findings from the instructor interviews, the student interviews, the reader interviews, and the student reflective letters.

In reporting the findings, I attempted to be true to the voices of the participants. Therefore, the punctuation, spelling, and grammar were left as written by the students. For the most egregious of errors, I did add the word [sic] to indicate that the word choice was deliberate and not a mistake on my part. However, adding [sic] to all the errors, I felt, would have interrupted the flow of this chapter.

### **Definition of Reflection**

Of the 15 participants interviewed, most had a similar definition of reflection. Most referred to reflection as a looking back with a sense of evaluation. Although reflection can be

known by many names, it was encouraging that the majority of these participants seemed to be on the same wavelength. One instructor's mind jumped right into reflection in writing, so I was unable to get her first impression of reflection. One of the students simply agreed with a fellow student who spoke first in the interview.

Two of the instructors and two of the readers defined reflection as a process of looking back and evaluating. Ellie said, "Reflection is looking back at what you've done and learning from that experience," and Teresa said, "Reflection is looking back at what you've said or done and thinking about it and making some form of judgment or evaluation or analysis of it." Christie called the process of looking back and making sense a "cognitive pulling together." Another reader, Rita, defined reflection as "the first step in being self-critical." Five of the seven students commented that reflection is something in the past, but only two of the students added the element of judgment. One of these students, Heidi, used the word "interpretation" when discussing reflection, and Hulk, another student, used the word "review" when talking about reflection.

These definitions support the definition of reflection as found in the literature. Deep reflection is the "deliberate and systematic attention to a student's self-reflective, metacognitive appraisal of why and—importantly—how learning has occurred" (Zubizarreta, 2004, p. xii). In this definition, the element of evaluation is present; students are not simply reviewing their learning, they are reflecting on why and how they learned. However, most of the students interviewed for this study understood reflection only as a review; they were unable to go to the next level, which is the analysis of the review.



### **Reflection as Auto-response**

Many of the reflective letters showed little sign of reflection. The students appeared simply to be making automatic responses when writing the reflective letter.

#### **Reflective letters**

##### **List-making**

Many of the letters were little more than lists of the competencies. They followed a paragraph format with some version of the following topic sentences:

I learned how to . . .  
 I feel that I did apply . . .  
 I also learned how to . . . (Kate)

Some students used bold subheaders to alert the reader to the competency they were addressing. Their letters looked much like this:

***Recursive***  
***Critical Thinking***  
***Conventions***  
***Research Techniques***  
***MLA Format***

While this format would be fine for an outline, [Darby's] English department had hoped for a bit more reflection within the body of the letter. This looks much like the recipe following that Schakel (2001) observed. Schakel's definition of recipe following is that, when students are asked to follow specific steps, the resulting reflection can become ritualized and thoughtless.

### **Instructor over-collaboration**

Some students tried to include transitions in their reflective letters, but they were weak at best. For example, “Now I will talk about MLA citations and works cited” (Shannon). This announcement still seems list-like, and harkens back to Yancey’s (1998) idea of teachers over-collaborating with their students. In this example, it appears as though the instructor of this student said, “Be sure to talk about MLA citations,” and the student dutifully complied.

### **Student regurgitation**

Other students simply rehashed the comments provided by their instructors. Angela said, “On all the papers, I need to number in the top right hand corner and have better titles for those papers. Also, I need to type more factual information instead of putting my two cents in about the subject.” Reflective letters such as this one seemed to view reflection as regurgitation, and the regurgitation could come either from the instructor (as in Angela’s example) or the textbook. This next example sounds like the student is copying from a handbook: “MLA citation involves both in-text and Works Cited. Book and movie titles are underlined or italicized.” This kind of regurgitation reflected Dewey’s (1933) view of recitation. Dewey believed that recitation encouraged passivity, and passivity is the opposite of thought. Thus, true reflection is not simple regurgitation.

### **No documentation**

Many students spent a great deal of time telling what they learned, but did not provide documentation to back up their argument. For example, “Annotating is something completely new to me.” This student just dropped this comment into his paragraph. He neither referred

the reader to another page in his portfolio nor developed the idea more fully. In addition, some students simply reviewed the class, not their learning:

After reading the *Time* magazine article about Weisskopf . . .  
 One day, our class watched a few different clips from the movie *Castaway* . . .  
 One of my last papers I wrote was about the television show . . .  
 The class read a short story from . . . (Emily)

In this example, Emily made no attempt to tie her learning into the five goals of the class.

These comments were similar to Yancey and Weiser's (1997) idea of the delivered versus the experienced curriculum. According to Yancey and Weiser, the delivered curriculum is the actual class in which the student is enrolled, while the experienced curriculum is the student's interpretation of the delivered curriculum. In this example, Emily is sharing her view of the experienced curriculum.

### **Mistake quantification**

Some students viewed the concept of reflection as an opportunity to quantify their mistakes. For example, "In the first essay that was a remembered event titled 'My Favorite Thing to Do' there were 45 commas that needed to be added. (1) The final essay of the Solution essay that I did on 'Red Light Cameras' was only missing nine commas. (28)" (Samantha). [The number 28 refers to page 28 in Samantha's portfolio.] While this example was, I'm sure, an attempt by Samantha to show growth, it teeters perilously close to instructor comment regurgitation. Samantha simply counted the number of comma mistakes in two of her papers and used this as evidence of improvement. While it is true that she may have become more facile with commas as the semester progressed, there is little reflection or thought involved in counting commas.

### **Schmooze factor**

Instead of reflecting, other students reverted to the inevitable “suck-up” factor, or according to Zubizarreta (2004), the “schmooze” and “glow” factor:

It is with no small measure that I attribute all the wonderful learning experiences I’ve gained in Composition I to Professor X. Through her patience and extremely effective techniques, our class has, for the most part, excelled considerably. From *Time* magazines to the highly anticipated homonym game, her quest for learning knows no boundaries. (Dan)

While Dan may be sincere, it is hard for readers to wade through his glowing remarks about the instructor to find true reflection.

The next comment was from a student who did a bit of dodging about her learning—or lack of learning:

I, unfortunately, missed class when we went on a library visit. Possibly the least attention was given to the Modern Language Associate (MLA) format. I’m sure that this was addressed sometime during my high school career, which ended in 1995, although I can’t say that I remember citing a single thing before now. Unfortunately my final paper using this system isn’t included in this portfolio. (Robyn)

### **One-paragraph reflective letters**

The following letter is an example of a complete letter; a reflective letter that addresses all of the competencies in just one paragraph. Unfortunately, we received quite a few of these:

Dear Reader:

Recursive writing has significantly helped me in this course. I can now revise, edit and submit a good final draft. My skills are greatly improved and it is a lot easier going through this process. Critical reading has helped me by [sic] giving me good examples of other stories and how other authors write. Many of my writing skills have increased from this course. Our instructor has taught us great skills such as grammar, punctuation, format and many more skills. I

am still not fluent with the MLA format, before this class I didn't even know what the MLA format was.

Sincerely,

Colten

Colten's reference to grammar, punctuation, and documentation techniques harkens back to White's (1985) idea that English instruction must socialize students by teaching them linguistic etiquette. Unfortunately, Colten was not able to demonstrate the "individualizing function of the discipline" (White, p. 15); he was unable to think individualistically.

### **Instructor and reader interviews**

The readers and instructors were also aware of the lack of reflection in the letters. "Since I volunteered my class for the very first pilot, I noticed in those early letters that many of the students were pretty much playing back what they thought someone wanted to hear. It sounded very robotic" (Teresa, Instructor). One instructor, Ellie, commented that she was looking forward to reading the letters because she feared that they might sound spoon-fed:

I feel like this will be the easiest assignment because of all the handouts I've given them. It seems like I'm saying "this is exactly what the format should look like, here are the five competencies, here are the questions you can answer in the competencies, and here's what your in-text citations should look like."

Rita, a reader, commented that she didn't see much reflection in the letters that she got:

I was kind of bored reading them and I sort of saw students going through the motions.

These comments support Schakel's (2001) finding of recipe following, discussed earlier.

### **Reflection as Cognitive Development**

This category refers to the cognitive ability of students to reflect, and there are several sub-themes that are included in this category. The first theme is the diversity of the [Darby] Community College student population, the second theme is the growth students experienced from their fear of writing to their feeling of confidence in their writing, and the third theme centers on student maturity and motivation.

#### **Student diversity**

As noted by Laanan (2003b), community college students are a diverse group. Not only are they older than the traditional college student, but they have also experienced more of life:

I always wondered what it would be like to go back to school to better myself, my education and to gain more training. After graduating from high school some 30 years ago and jumping right from the frying pan into the fire, I went into the work force and raised a family. My only wish would have been that I would have gone back to school earlier in my life. (Larry)

Not only are many [Darby] students older, they have had other careers before starting college. Here are two examples:

Thirdly, I would like to discuss how I learned to incorporate the rules of Standard English grammar into my writing. This is only my second semester in college. I graduated from beauty school; however, focusing on grammar wasn't the school's main concern. (Lindsey)

I wrote and rewrote my paper a few times, trying not to sound like I was dragging on. It had been a long time since I'd written anything longer than a military brief. (Mackenzie)

Rita, an instructor, commented on the expectations community college instructors have of their students:

We don't expect them to have great skills because it's such a diverse population. We have some students who write well already, students who have had a lot of practice, students who haven't written in ten years, those who have never written at all—it's hard to figure out what expectations to have.

### **Writing confidence**

Many students commented on their fear of writing. This fear could be due to the diversity of community college students and the fact that many of them have been involved in making a living as opposed to going to school. However, along with the recognition of their fear, came recognition of their growth as a writer, especially in terms of writing confidence. Nicole said, "I was nervous due to my being out of school for almost 10 years. I really didn't know what to expect. With that being said, I have come a long way since the first day of class."

Melissa's fear so paralyzed her that she made a poor decision about writing: "At the beginning of another class, I was so worried about plagiarizing that I didn't turn in my first paper."

Joshua summed up many student comments when he said:

College English, taken my freshman year, was a frightening thing for me. Writing has always been a chore and I hated the thought of needing to churn out one college level paper after another. Surprising to me, I have not only persevered to the end, but I found that it wasn't as dreadful as I feared.

Paul commented on his growth as a writer:

In fact, I was somewhat nervous about taking this class, but now as I create this final piece, I am more than comfortable finding a topic, researching it, and then seeing the draft roll off the printer.

The comments from these students support Tagg's (2003) idea of incremental theory versus entity theory. These students may once have been entity theorists who believed that

intelligence is unchangeable, but it appears as though they have switched to being incremental theorists; they believe that intelligence, and in this case, writing ability, is changeable.

The growth in students' writing confidence is not just evident in the reflective letters; one of the instructors, Ellie, prefers to teach Composition I because she likes the learning curve of the students:

I like teaching Comp I because they come in and they're really nervous about their writing and coming to college. Sometimes, the adult students haven't been writing for 15 years or so. I like to see the growth; how they write at the beginning of the semester and how they write at the end—the diagnostic compared to the position paper.

### **Student maturity and motivation**

The next theme that appeared in the data is that of student maturity and motivation. While Ellie prefers to teach Comp I, she had a particularly difficult semester the semester this study was conducted. "I've never had such challenges as I've had this semester. I think it's a combination of three factors; maturity, laziness, and intellectual. [ . . . ] Unfortunately, this semester, I have had students who are huge procrastinators."

The behavior of some of Ellie's students this semester prevented them from being able to reflect on their progress and to engage in deep learning. Tasha, a reader, commented on how motivation affects learning:

I think that part of grasping formatting is related to what motivates the student because some students are motivated to learn, and those kind of students you can probably appeal to them by telling them the philosophical differences, but there are other students who may be very good students, and they might get very good grades, but their motivation is what do I need to do to get the A, not what do I need to do to learn the material. So, if they're very menu-driven and you give them a list, they can follow that list; they may not have learned it, but they might have done well enough.



Tasha's thesis was supported by the comments in the reflective letters. Sigifredo said, "My overall improvement and understanding in the class can be seen through my grades. On my first essay I got an N/G (not graded), on my second A-, my third B+, and my fourth another A-." Dakota, another student, admits that he or she was also motivated almost solely by grades. "As far as the recursive process goes, every paper I revised increased my grade to an 'A.' I had incentive to use this process more than I would otherwise to achieve higher scores on my papers."

Hannah, an instructor, wrestled with the concept of reflective maturity in her class. "Some students had difficulty moving toward an awareness of others; having them take an accountability of one's self is difficult." This comment ties in with Latta and Laurer's (2000) belief that reflection is a difficult skill to learn. However, Hulk (his choice of pseudonym), the oldest and most mature of the students I interviewed, addressed this issue in his reflective letter.

My attitude at the end of the semester is much similar to the attitude I had at the beginning of the semester. That attitude is simply this: Comp I will be exactly what I make of it. If I choose to do the reading and be as creative as possible, good things will come. If I choose to skim by, just doing enough to pass, then I will just barely pass.

Regarding the concept of reflective maturity, Teresa, an instructor with a background in special education, commented that:

writing is a more difficult skill base than just thought reflection. Thought reflection is at the cognitive level, but writing takes it a step further. It's a very difficult process to take something from your mind and analyze it at the cognitive level and then translate that into written language.

Teresa's thoughts here mirror Yancey's (1998) reflection-in-action, constructive reflection, and reflection-in-presentation. Reflection-in-action is the process of reviewing and revising,

it takes place within a composing event, and it happens both in the mind and on paper.

Constructive reflection entails reflective transfer—“a writer’s ability to gather knowledge and apply that knowledge to similar problems” (Yancey, p. 51). Reflection-in-presentation is both private, a reflection, and public, a text for others to read.

Teresa’s concerns center on whether the students are “mentally and emotionally at a point that they can successfully complete a reflective writing process.” However, on the other end of the spectrum from Teresa, Rita, an instructor and reader, analyzed the situation this way:

When I get discouraged about their unwillingness to really think, I tell myself that they don’t know how to think, this is what I’m teaching them. I have the first chance of teaching a concept that is part of a four-year or two-year process; I’m the first person to get them and even open their minds to the possibility of critical thinking. Learning how to think in college is the most important thing. However, I didn’t figure this out until after college.

### **Reflection as Conversation**

This name for this theme came directly from Ellie’s thoughts on how she would like her comments on students’ papers to be viewed.

I look at my comments as part of the conversation; their writing is one part of the conversation and my comments are another part of the conversation. Their response to my comments will either end the conversation or begin a new conversation.

This connects with Spaulding and Wilson’s (2002) findings that personalized feedback helped students grow.

The two overwhelming sub-themes that occurred in the students’ reflective letters were: (a) peer edits are helpful, and (b) learning how to properly cite sources is hard. Both of these themes fit into the overarching theme of reflection as conversation because the students

(a) see peer reviews as part of the conversation, and (b) need to be involved in more conversations about Modern Language Association (MLA) formatting.

### **Peer reviews**

Regarding peer reviews, several students touched on the concept of audience. “The peer reviews that we did in class helped me tremendously. I learned that what I feel is clear and straight forward can be confusing for others” (Matthew). Zach mentioned that he had to have three people edit it so “I could find out what my audience liked or disliked. It helped clarify what I was saying and helped me get in touch with my audience.” Ben noted that “sending my paper through peer [sic] review helped me make my final decision on what I should keep and what I should remove.” Michelle admitted that, although she didn’t see the value in peer reviews at the beginning of the semester, she learned to appreciate them:

I was not thrilled with the idea of doing a peer review for my fellow classmates, in the end it was as helpful for me to do them, as it was to receive them. At first I rejected the idea. My thought was who am I to judge someone else’s work? I quickly learned I wasn’t judging, I was helping and learning.

These comments mirror Holt’s (2006) results that found peer sharing a useful tool for teaching critical reflection.

### **MLA format**

The other sub-theme that emerged from the students’ reflective letters was the difficulty of correctly using the MLA format. This was almost universal:

To be completely honest, I did not fully grasp the MLA format. I thought I understood it, however there were parts that I obviously did not comprehend. Having this complex system understood completely without errors will take many years to master. (Lindsay)

Taylor admitted that demonstrating the proper use of MLA format has been a “tall mountain of frustration as well as growth for me.” The students often used the reflective letter as an opportunity to discuss why they hadn’t mastered MLA citation procedures.

I knew I was going to struggle on the research paper with the MLA documentation. I understand the importance of it, but the issue is that I just don’t get excited citing sources. I found it tedious and, I’m almost embarrassed to admit it, I also found it difficult. (Hulk)

Many of the comments sounded like the students only took the opportunity to converse about the difficulties with the procedure in their reflective letters; none of the comments alluded to discussing the system with their instructors. It seemed as if most students tried the procedure, and then waited to see the results. At the end of the semester when they were asked to address whether they had met the competency of understanding MLA citation, they continued the conversation, which had been initiated by their instructors on the students’ Works Cited pages, with a theme of “I’m still confused.”

One student, Jason, boiled it down to two comments: (1) “everyone needs to practice the MLA style to achieve some level of comfort with it,” and (2) “having written the final paper, I am still not completely comfortable with it.” He went on to say that he believes that MLA is so confusing at times that it is something that “needs more work on the part of the MLA to provide consistency to researchers.” While admitting his lack of comfort with the system, he placed the blame elsewhere—he admonished the Modern Language Association to make it simpler for writers.

Part of the students’ frustration with MLA might stem from Tagg’s (2003) idea of the difference between entity theory and incremental theory. An entity theorist believes that

intelligence is static, but an incremental theorist believes that intelligence can be changed. While it is comforting for students to be able to learn new things (incremental theory), they often get discouraged because the process is so long and arduous. Although these comments reveal the students' frustration with learning proper documentation procedures, it is almost as if the students would like to become entity theorists, so they would not have to learn the procedures.

In addition to student frustration with learning documentation, Ellie commented on her frustration with teaching it. "With the last two papers, we go through our works cited pages numerous, numerous times, and I'll get a handful of students in a class that can do it right. I guess I need to find a way to reflect back on that." This comment ties in with Schön's (1997) idea that reflective practitioners reflect on an action.

Tasha, a reader, commented on how the students' frustration with MLA impacted her:

The one thing that I took away is that I probably need to spend more time talking about documentation and documentation style. In sociology, we use a different format that's not taught in Comp I courses. We use ASA and most of them have never heard of it, so I need to do some additional training.

### **Reflection as Opportunity**

This theme stems more from the instructors and readers than it does from the students. Although I found no reflective letters that directly stated, "Thank you for the opportunity to reflect on my work," many students implied that once they did reflect on their work, they were surprised to see how much they learned. However, all of the instructors and all of the readers did make direct comments on this issue.

### **Opportunity to reflect**

I appreciate the opportunity to participate in this assessment because at first, and to be honest with you, from an instructor's perspective, something like this is also a reflection of you as an instructor. The first couple of semesters that I participated in the pilot tests, I felt like I hadn't done a good job of teaching them the reflective letter, but as time progressed, I've grown up a little bit. I've tried to improve the class and I'm beginning to sort through what I'm asking them to do and what's being evaluated. I'm coming to better terms with the assessment. (Teresa)

Both Rita and Ellie commented on how the assessment encouraged them to reflect on the teaching of writing and writing assessment. Hannah spent so much time reflecting on the assessment that she produced five lengthy e-mails and a treatise on the importance of matching the philosophy of writing to writing reflection:

This assessment really helped me get thinking about what are the competencies and how I do the competencies, and I think all full-time faculty and adjuncts should be required to write a reflective letter on their course, attach a syllabus, and reflect on what it is they do in their course to meet the competencies. (Hannah)

These comments support the literature that noted that portfolio assessment opens the doors for secondary conversations, and it is often these conversations that become the most important part of the assessment (Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 2000).

### **Opportunity to better understand students**

Two of the instructors commented more directly on how the reflective letters helped them better understand their students. Rita said "as a teacher, I like the assignment as a tool because I think reading those letters as a final assignment gave me a lot of insight into how I was teaching; it was like getting my course evaluations early." Teresa noted that she has always included reflection in her class because it makes sense and helps students learn, but she has also learned from studying what helps her students learn.

### **Opportunity to participate**

On a smaller scale, Tasha, a reader and adjunct who teaches solely online, commented on how this assessment presented her with another kind of opportunity: “an opportunity for me to be involved, for me to meet people, and plus get paid for my efforts.” Christie commented that she saw the reader training as an opportunity to find out what kinds of assignments the composition teachers assigned so that she could better align her business assignments with the English department.

### **Opportunity to view writing differently**

On a larger scale, Rita analyzed how reflection gives students an opportunity to view their writing from a different perspective:

With reflection, you have to look at your writing as if you were another person. When I read it as a teacher, I look at it as if I were not the teacher, but a whole other person; a person who doesn't understand what is going on. When you see writing that way, you can write better because you are considering other people. This relates to reflection because reflection is looking at yourself in the mirror. However, that is just your reflection, so what you do when you do that process is you step out of yourself and look at another person which is yourself. I think that the mirror analogy is that when we look at the world, we see it from the inside of our bodies, but when we look at a reflection, we're seeing it from the outside of our body. We try to get students to look at their writing outside of their body, outside of their own head.

The concept of audience is a tough concept for students to grasp. Between the two interviews, Rita reflected on the concept of reflection and came up with two analogies, the reflection in the mirror and the out-of-body experience, that will better help her students understand the nature of audience in writing. This kind of reflection ties in with Dewey's

(1933) concept of reflection that begins as a state of doubt, and through reflection, that state of doubt is resolved.

### **Reflection as Pedagogy**

This theme deals with practices to improve reflection, and several major sub-themes emerged in this category: (1) the importance of revising; (2) the use of journals; (3) the use of rubrics; (4) reflection as a tool; and (5) teaching critical thinking.

#### **Importance of revising**

This first sub-theme is the students' acceptance of the importance of revising as evidenced by their comments about recursive writing in their reflective letters. "While writing my first drafts, my teacher always said, 'Dare to be bad.' I decided to live by this. I throw all my ideas on paper and then keep rewriting until it gets better" (Catherine).

Vickie defined recursive writing as "a continually looping; always going over what you have done and making it better with each loop through." Heather noted that "the recursive process helped me to go back in my work in order to go forward." One student, who didn't sign the letter, emphasized that only when one understands the importance of the recursive process can one fully utilize its potential.

#### **Use of journals**

Journaling is a pedagogical practice that many instructors use to generate reflection. Most of the studies of reflection center on the use of journals, especially for pre-service teachers. Christie, a reader and business instructor, commented that she used journals in her personal finance class to allow the students to chronicle how they felt about their purchases,



and she also used journaling in her advertising class where the students were asked to keep a log of the billboards and television ads they noticed and how they felt about them. However, she noted:

I didn't get thoughtful responses until the end. Usually when a student starts in the class, there's always the trepidation of I-don't-want-to-share-too-much-of-myself or this is silly, but as they progress through the course, you can see some growth, there's some connection.

According to the student interviews and reflective letters, most students like to journal. Hulk noted that he "learned a lot about myself in these journal entries," and Heather noted that she would always go back to her creative writing journal in high school to check her teacher's comments before she wrote a new paper.

The use of journaling can be interpreted to support Baxter Magolda's (1992, as cited in Broad, 2003) theory of self-authorship. Self-authorship is defined as the "ability to collect, interpret, and analyze information, and reflect on one's own beliefs in order to form judgments" (p. 3).

### **Use of rubrics**

The use of rubrics was another sub-theme that surfaced. Of course, the assessment used a rubric to assess the reflective letters, and much time had been spent by the [Darby] English department trying to agree on an appropriate rubric. In fact, the rubric that was used in the assessment (Appendix B7) had undergone several iterations and pilot tests before it was used in the district-wide assessment in fall 2006. Wilson (2006) felt strongly that rubrics were "created to manufacture consensus" (p. 53).

While there was not a question on the interview protocol devoted to rubrics, the subject of rubrics often came up in the participant interviews. When asked if she was

bothered by those students who didn't follow a business letter format, one reader said, "I guess those things didn't really bother me because that's not something you're asking me to focus on. There's no section on the rubric for format; I don't think that's what you really care about" (Rita).

Two of the instructors had differing opinions on their use of rubrics in their classrooms. Tasha explained that she chooses not to use rubrics, but has used them when she's been forced into it. She first encountered them at the community college level where there seemed to be a focus on rubrics:

I made an effort with every assignment I designed, I'd have a cute little rubric that went along with it. That way, I could justify the grades I had given. Really, the rubrics I designed aren't any different from the criteria I used to give in assignments for the first 10 years I was teaching; they're just cuter now.

Teresa uses a holistic reading rubric in her classes and when she evaluated the students' reflective letters, she used the same grading rubric that she had applied to all of their writing. However, Teresa was concerned about whether using the reflective letter as a final exam (which is not required) is appropriate:

Although reflection is absolutely incredible, it's a much different writing activity than is writing an essay. My question is not whether it's right or wrong, but whether I am doing the best that I can in terms of evaluating those students on that particular type of writing.

She thinks that if students wrote reflections that were graded throughout the semester, then the reflective letter as a final exam "would be more apples to apples. Currently, reflection is not listed as a competency; there's recursive writing and revision, but that's not reflection."

### **As a tool**

Hannah, another instructor, spent a great deal of time wondering if we should be assessing the reflection or a piece of writing. She solved her internal argument with the following analysis.

Reflection is a tool, in the writing process, but it is not the end result. Writers don't write and then reflect and present/showcase their reflection; they use that reflection to make their writing better. To assess reflection rather than how the students use reflection (i.e., to create an effective piece of writing) seems to stop short of getting at what we really want to know – how well do our students write.

In addition, Hannah believed that there must be alignment between one's philosophical approach to writing and one's approach to reflection in writing. She wrote a treatise on the subject (Appendix E1) and noted that what she hoped her treatise would accomplish was “getting instructors to examine their own teaching. I would like them to realize where they are on the continuum and then design their reflection to match their approach.”

### **Teaching critical thinking**

Rita's reflections on the subject of pedagogy tended toward the importance and difficulty of using reflection to teach critical thinking to the students. Her conclusion is remarkable in its simplicity. “Maybe it's okay if the students don't know that that's what we're trying to teach. Maybe it's okay if it's a secret, just as long as we're teaching it to them.”

### **Reflection as Real-world Skills**

Christie, the former human resource director, and Teresa, the former corporate trainer, both mused on how this assessment ties in to the real world. As a reader, Christie noticed that many of the portfolios were sloppy and commented that she was

a little disheartened in this is a professional thing they're supposed to do; it's supposed to look nice. I'm thinking if that went to your boss . . . If you don't care enough about how that's presented why should I care what's in there?

At least one student, Steve, understood the professional nature of the assessment, and noted that putting together his portfolio was time-consuming. He said it "wasn't hard; it just took a little while. You had to make sure everything looked good."

Ellie and Rita noted that while composition is about writing, good writing is about communication. Christie commented that "when you go into the business world, you've got to make yourself heard, you've got to make people aware of you; you need communication. If we can't read your handwriting, you're not communicating."

Teresa made the connection between the students evaluating themselves on the competencies and employees being measured by competencies and skill sets.

The questions in the workplace are the same as this assessment: what did you learn, what did the managers see that you had learned, and how do you measure that? This makes total sense because this is the way the corporate world operates in terms of performance management, performance evaluations, and performance appraisals. We are helping our students with one of the core skills with how you are paid. The only difference is that while students receive a grade for their reflection and demonstration skills, employees receive a paycheck.

### **Reflection as Responsibility**

This overarching theme was touched on by the instructors, students, and readers. All agreed that teaching reflection, learning reflection, and evaluating reflection is a huge responsibility.

#### **Instructors**

The instructors offered their views on what it means to be an instructor charged with teaching reflection. Ellie said, “It’s a big responsibility as an instructor to have students reflect on their work. I think a lot of students don’t know what reflection means, so a lot of the weight falls on the instructor throughout the semester to continue to keep that idea of reflecting on everything they’ve done. This comment relates to Hinck’s (2005) study where she found that, in order to be useful, reflection needs to be continuous.

Teresa also commented on the responsibility:

It’s a big responsibility to be a composition instructor charged with teaching reflection. You have to be certain in your own mind of the competencies that you’re teaching, and then you have to be certain of how reflection links to those competencies, and then you have to think about how to teach it. For me, it’s been perplexing, sometimes frustrating, and sometimes gratifying. It’s posed its own challenges to also include reflection as part of the curriculum. I’ve been working on this for several semesters, and I’ve learned each semester how I can create reflection as part of an almost seamless part of the writing process as opposed to something extra the students need to accomplish.

This comment connects to Maclellan’s (2004) study where she found that in order to use reflection for learning, it must be conscious. Here, Teresa is consciously thinking about how to relate the competencies to reflection.

Hannah focused on the importance of being part of a team, “part of a coherent process rather than just an individual in a classroom doing my own thing. In addition, it charges me to be reflective about my own teaching.”

## **Readers**

The readers viewed responsibility in a different light. Both of the readers who were not English instructors commented on the importance of having their scores match with those of the English department. “During the training, I was pleased that I scored like the other English instructors” (Christie). Tasha noted that the training helped “to affirm that I was at least on the right track because I think most of my scores measured up with other people in the room.”

The other aspect of responsibility that was mentioned by the readers was the importance of being fair to the student. Tasha mentioned several times that, while the assessment didn’t affect the student or his or her grade, it was important to her to “feel like I was doing a service to the student.” Christie noted that being a reader charged with evaluating reflective writing brings a great deal of responsibility, “not only to the student, but to the college as well.” The college needs to be aware of its students’ skill levels—before the students are sent into the world. The cross-discipline, holistic reading session helped illustrate those skills.

## **Students**

The students reflected more on their responsibilities as editors, and most mentioned how hard it was to be an editor because they didn’t want the writers to be insulted by their suggestions. One student commented on the difficulty of helping a recalcitrant student: “I found the work of another student to be kind of boring and it always had a tone that was not

pleasant to read. It did kind of bother me to work with her” (Hulk). Another student was uncomfortable in the role of editor because “I never considered myself to be a great writer, so I could find the small errors” (Andy).

### **Reflection as Resistance**

The most pronounced example of this theme came from Rhonda, a student who was interviewed:

I thought this teacher made the students do too much of the thinking in the class; I think it should have been the teacher. I don’t know why I should have to explain why I’ve accomplished these five core competencies. I think that’s up to the teacher. I don’t think I should have to defend myself.

Ethan, another participant from a different instructor, echoed Rhonda’s opinions:

I know most of the kids don’t think it’s probably educational to do a whole portfolio because they probably won’t learn anything from it. It’s not like they’re going to go back and look at it and say, “Oh, my. I did good on this or that.”

In addition to student comments, Tasha, a reader, commented on a letter she read:

I read one where, I believe he signed his name to it; it was a young man who said this is absolutely ridiculous that [Darby] thinks I should learn MLA and I’m not going to. You won’t find it in the portfolio and it’s just absolutely ridiculous for me to learn to cite information.

Hannah, an instructor, noted that one of her students said, “It’s not that I didn’t learn it, it’s that I chose not to do it.”

All four of these students were reacting negatively to the idea that portfolio assessment forces students to take responsibility for their own learning (White, 2007).

### **Reflection as Understanding**

This theme is the reason why this study was undertaken. White's (2005) Phase 2 Scoring makes a large-scale, holistic scoring of portfolios possible, but the single, most important question is do the reflective letters demonstrate genuine reflection? The answer, according to the reflective letters and the readers, is yes.

#### **Reflective letters**

Although genuine reflection was not evident in each letter, some letters revealed deep reflection. For example, Dan stated, "this semester has served as a reminder that critical reading is about analyzing the details and purpose of writings; even if that purpose is offensive." Jackie wondered what makes good writing, and commented that "after taking this course, I look at things I read and write differently." Like Jackie, Allison commented that the major difference in what she learned is in "how I think. I have become a much deeper thinker over the course of this class." Jocasta noted that in reflection "one must, in a sense, interview oneself, asking questions to retrieve important points concentrating on an angle from which to approach reflective writing."

Some students learned simple things, but were able to utilize Schön's (1987) reflection-in-action where "our thinking serves to reshape what we are doing while we are doing it" (p. 26):

As you can see on page 19, I cited Wikipedia Encyclopedia. I was not aware that this was not a credited source. Wikipedia lets almost anyone submit information. I was not aware of this. This [sic], while researching for my paper "24: The Ultimate Drama," I came across information from Wikipedia. I remembered that this was not a credible source and decided not to use this information. (Jodi)



This comment also reinforces the Hilgers, Hussey and Stitt-Bergh (2000) study where the researchers found that self-assessment can stop automatic behavior.

Watson (2000) believed in the power of metaphors to encourage new insights, and several of the reflective letters demonstrate this power. Jason discussed the importance of an outline using the following metaphor:

Initially, I merely read through the essays and responded as I saw fit (page 2-3). However as the complexity developed in the subjects of the essays, I needed a lighthouse to keep my ship from crashing onto rocky shores. That was my outline.

Ian used a simile to illustrate the difficulty of writing. “Whether these papers came to me right away and flowed forth fluidly from my fingertips, or dripped out like the last drops from a faucet, they all took work.”

The literature showed that reflection is helpful in developing critical thinking skills, and it is invaluable in the teaching of writing. Unless students can learn to reflect on their writing, they won’t ever be able to improve their writing (Howard, 2000).

## **Readers**

The readers were able to tell the difference between the recipe-following type of reflection, the brown-nosing type of reflection, and the genuine reflection:

I could see real reflection in some of them most definitely. In some, you could tell that they had taken the time to go back through what they had learned and to really evaluate themselves because some of the letters were very honest.  
(Tasha)

Christie, however, summed up the attributes of real reflection in the following comment:

You can really tell the ones that are heartfelt because they admit they came into this not knowing, and they still don’t know. However, now they know that they don’t know, and I thought, “Now, that’s a person who understands.” I don’t know what grade they got in the class, but somebody learned

something, and reading those is always a pleasure. One letter from a female discussed her struggles with writing and she said now that I know what I don't know, I will continue to read and be aware of it. It was her increased awareness that impressed me.

## **Conclusion**

This section provides a summary of the findings presented in this chapter. It is organized according to the nine themes that emerged during the analysis and coding process: (1) reflection as auto-response; (2) reflection as cognitive development; (3) reflection as conversation; (4) reflection as opportunity; (5) reflection as pedagogy; (6) reflection as real-world skills; (7) reflection as responsibility; (8) reflection as resistance; and (9) reflection as understanding.

### **Reflection as auto-response**

Most of the reflective letters in this study fit into this category because they were either: a list of competencies, a restatement of instructor comments, a review of class activities, a quantification of student mistakes, a litany of instructor flattery, or a dearth of documentation.

### **Reflection as cognitive development**

This category focused on student diversity, student maturity and motivation, and the growth of writing confidence. Many of [Darby's] students are non-traditional and, as a result, many of these students may not be cognitively ready to reflect on their writing. In addition, some students may be too immature or too unmotivated to engage in reflection. However, as the semester progressed, many students commented that their initial fear of writing dissipated and was replaced by a feeling of confidence in their writing.

**Reflection as conversation**

All of the instructors and students reflected on the importance of peer reviews. Having another person comment on a draft provided a sneak peek into the minds of the intended audience, and allowed the writers to participate in silent conversations with their readers. Another theme that emerged was the difficulty of MLA documentation. This was the most consistent finding throughout the study, and it is placed under the theme of reflection as conversation because the students felt that the time devoted to this conversational topic was too short.

**Reflection as opportunity**

The instructors appreciated the opportunity to reflect on their teaching process. The meta-reflection about the reflective assessment process helped open doors for conversations about the teaching of writing, the competencies of Composition I, and the assessment of writing.

**Reflection as pedagogy**

Under the umbrella of pedagogy, four practices for teaching reflection emerged. These were the importance of revision, the use of journals, the use of rubrics, and the use of reflection as a tool to teach critical thinking.

**Reflection as real-world skills**

Several readers, instructors, and students emphasized the close connection between reflection in the classroom and reflection in the business world. They noted that professional

communications should look nice, and that in the workplace, employees reflect, evaluate, and measure all the time.

**Reflection as responsibility**

All of the participants in this study agreed that teaching reflection, learning reflection, and evaluating reflection is an enormous undertaking for all those involved.

**Reflection as resistance**

As evidenced by their interviews or their reflective letters, several students resisted either the learning process or being asked to demonstrate the learning process.

**Reflection as understanding**

This last theme is the polar opposite of the first theme of reflection as auto-response. The purpose of this study was to determine if students could genuinely reflect, and the answer was yes. The reflective letters occasionally revealed genuine reflection and the readers could easily identify genuine reflection.

## **CHAPTER 6. SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The problem addressed in this case study was whether the writing ability of community college students could be authentically assessed. This chapter provides a summary of the study and conclusions based on the research questions. Then I articulate the implications of the study for the various constituencies, and suggest recommendations for the constituencies and for future research.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this study was to seek to understand the nature of reflection in writing assessment. This qualitative case study examined, in depth, a new holistically-scored portfolio course evaluation program at a Midwestern community college. The assessment required first-year composition students to submit a reflective letter that used the contents of their Composition I portfolio as evidence for an argument that the student had either met or not met the five goals of the course.

The overarching research question for this inquiry was “what role does reflection play in the teaching, learning, and evaluation of writing?” Contained within that question are the three stakeholders who were involved in the writing assessment: the instructors, the students, and the readers. Although the secondary questions sought information from the stakeholders on how they described their understanding of reflection in light of their role in the program, the three implied questions in this study were: (1) can reflection be taught, (2) can students reflect, and (3) can reflection be recognized?

A purposeful sample of three first-year assessment composition instructors, three adjunct instructors who served as readers for the assessment, and nine students (three from each of the instructors) was selected. Data consisted of content analysis of the reflective letters from the student portfolios and in-depth interviews, using Seidman's (1998) model. Once the interviews were transcribed, the transcripts were condensed into a first-person profile of each participant. The transcripts and the reflective letters were then analyzed and coded according to the themes that emerged. Nine overarching themes were realized: reflection as auto-response, reflection as cognitive development, reflection as conversation, reflection as pedagogy, reflection as real world skills, reflection as responsibility, reflection as opportunity, reflection as resistance, and reflection as understanding.

### **Conclusions**

The focus of the study was to determine if students could reflect. Since White's (2005) Phase 2 scoring enables portfolios to be scored reliably for a large-scale assessment program, the key question in this assessment centers on validity (or, to use Lincoln and Guba's [1985] term "credibility"). This assessment can only be considered valid, or credible, if the students can reflect. In order to enable portfolios to become the rich assessments they are purported to be, reflection is a necessary element. The act of reflecting is what transforms a collection of papers into a portfolio. Reflection is necessary to make students stewards of their own learning.

If students are unable or unwilling to reflect, this assessment becomes invalid. Although the assessment will still produce quantitative data in the form of graphs (Appendix A2), the graphs will have no meaning if the assessment cannot be shown to be valid.

The conclusions in this chapter are organized by the three implied research questions in this study which are, in turn, tied to the roles of the participants in the study: (1) can reflection be taught (instructors); (2) can students reflect (students); and (3) can reflection be recognized (readers)?

1. Students can be taught how to reflect on their writing.

In this study, all of the participants defined reflection as a process of looking back and evaluating. In order for instructors to teach reflection, they need to be able to incorporate reflective activities throughout the semester, so that the students are continually engaged in this process of looking back and evaluating. It does not work to teach writing skills, such as organization and the conventions of standard written English, without requiring students to reflect on those skills. By incorporating reflective activities into their first-year composition course, instructors can create a seamless interweaving of reflection with writing skills.

Although the study was not intended as a compilation of strategies designed to teach reflection, several of the participants discussed specific strategies. One of the most important of these strategies was the comment from Tasha's professor. He suggested that 80% of her time should be spent looking out the window and 20% of her time should be spent writing her paper. Reflection is thinking and, as long as that 80% of the time is spent actually thinking about the issue, reflection is occurring. Most students resist the thought process; they think that writing is the only thing that counts. If more faculty would incorporate the importance of "looking out the window" in their classes, more students would begin to grasp the concept of reflection. Reflection must become an organic part of composition classes.

## 2. Students can, and do, reflect.

While this study sought to find answers as to whether the students can reflect on their writing as it relates to the five goals of the class, what was uncovered is that many students reflected, but not on the goals of the course. Some students reflected on life. One of Ellie's students, who could have done well in the course, but who ended up getting a "D," in her letter said that although she could have done better, she had a lot going on in her life and her grade wasn't a reflection on Ellie's teaching. Another nontraditional student who was enrolled in a learning community of a Composition I class and a Humanities Through the Arts class, commented that before this class, she had never set foot inside an art center or museum, and the biggest obstacle for her in the class was her lack of a computer. However, due to the helpfulness of her classmates, she purchased a computer and learned how to use it. Although neither of these reflections relate directly to the goals of the course, they do demonstrate reflection.

While some of the students didn't reflect on the goals of the course, other students reflected on the goals, but were unable to document whether they met the goals. This is a point of difference between the assessment and this study. While the assessment was looking for evidence of learning, this study was looking for evidence of reflection. Thus, if a student reflected that he or she had not met the goals of the course and could explain why, that became an example of genuine reflection, even though this result may have been discouraging in terms of the assessment. Increased awareness of what a student doesn't know is evidence of reflection.

However, the finding that lends itself most completely to the issue of student reflection is the importance of peer reviews. Most of the students who were interviewed and



most of the reflective letters commented on how helpful the peer reviews were. While the students admitted their discomfort with being a peer editor, they valued the help they received from the peer editors. Even if the suggestions from the editors were weak, engaging in reflection was necessary for the student to weigh the quality of the responses and to decide whether to act on those suggestions.

The idea of whether students are cognitively ready to reflect is also a part of this conclusion. Some students were able to reflect and some students weren't. However, many of the students in this study spent a great deal of time reviewing their work and reflecting on the growth they made in the semester. In addition, many students were also able to connect their writing growth to their lives, as demonstrated in this example. "Critical reading strategies was [sic] probably the easiest for me because I had a background in reading through other people's works and either playing editor or rewriting the entire document based on their intent. Chalk one up for the Army" (unsigned reflective letter).

### 3. Reflection can be recognized.

The readers in this assessment program were able to distinguish between surface reflection and deep reflection. They admitted that their scores were higher when they saw evidence of deep reflection occurring. Surface reflection includes a simple recounting of the class, a listing of the class goals and a weak attempt to address them, and the "schmooze" factor. Those students who reflected, whether it was on life in general, how the composition class changed their life, or how their life intertwined with the goals of the class, were rewarded in the minds of the readers for their reflective ability. However, since reflection is

currently not one of the competencies for the course, and thus, does not warrant a square on the reading rubric, these reflections may not have been included in the scores for that letter.

One of the kinds of reflection that the readers most appreciated was when the personality of the writer would come through. The following is an example:

Research techniques. Doesn't that fall along the lines of critical reading? I'm pretty damn sure it does. Along with critical reading, though, you have to be sure you are citing your sources, which is the next 'goal.' How great is that, let's take two gators with one bullet . . ." (Appendix E2)

When students are able to reflect on their learning while maintaining their own voices, the result is a demonstration of deep reflection.

#### 4. The reading session was beneficial to the readers.

One of the most important findings of this study was that, beyond the monetary compensation for reading the reflective letters, the readers found the reading session helpful to them as instructors. All of the readers commented on the importance of the collegiality among the readers, as well as the importance of being able to better align their own assignments, in their own disciplines, with those of the English department. However, the greatest benefit to the readers was the opportunity afforded by the reading session to think reflectively about their own teaching. Reviewing the reflection of composition students jumpstarted the metacognition of the readers about how they use reflection in their disciplines. Tasha commented on how she asks for reflection in her classes but calls it application, and Christie commented on how she uses journals in her business classes to engage students in the process of reflection.

## **Implications**

The major contribution of this inquiry to the study of reflection in writing is the voices of the participants. However, there are three distinct stakeholders who stand to benefit from the findings in this study. These stakeholders are composition students, writing instructors, and college administrators.

### **Composition students**

Composition students benefit from the program assessment used in this study. Although this is a summative assessment, it provides a snapshot of the students' learning at a specific point in time and, thus, can be used as a formative assessment for them. Since students are asked to reflect on their strengths and weaknesses in writing at the end of their first semester in composition (a summative assessment for the college), their reflections then become a formative assessment of their writing process. Students, hopefully, will be able to take the summative assessment of their abilities and build on their strengths and improve their weaknesses as they encounter more writing situations—either in college or in life. They will have transformed a summative assessment into something useful for them; a formative assessment that provides a guidepost for their writing. This enables them to take ownership of their learning, and learning to take ownership of learning is a powerful skill to master.

### **Writing instructors**

The implications for writing instructors from this study are myriad. There are four areas that will be useful to those people who teach writing. These areas are improving teaching practices, becoming other-centered, relying less on prescriptive assignments, and considering competencies.

### **Improving teaching practice**

Two of the sub-themes that emerged from this study, the fear of writing and the difficulty of mastering a system of citation, reveal to instructors the need to be cognizant of these issues, and the need to devote more time to these areas.

### **Becoming other-centered**

This study revealed the relationship between the following factors: the use of journals, the use of peer reviews, and the difficulty of the concept of audience.

In order to learn the process of reflection, students must travel from an inward, or private, journey to an outward, or public, journey. Two stages of this journey can be facilitated through the use of journals and peer reviews. When creating a journal entry, students are engaged in private thoughts, which reflects a “me” attitude. Since most of the students found journals to be helpful, this indicates that most students are comfortable writing in this “me” mode. However, to push the students forward on their journey, they must move out of the “me” mode and into the “you” mode. This can be accomplished through the use of peer reviews. In this strategy, students are reading the writing of other people (“you”) and are beginning to see writing through the eyes of another person. They can see when the “you” is not making sense or when the writing is confusing to the reader. Since it is hard to see this in their own writing, studying the writings of others teaches students how to better analyze, or reflect on, their own writing. The “you’s” help the “me’s” to become better writers.

The last stage of the journey centers on the concept of audience, or a “them” mentality. This is the most difficult stage for writers to achieve. All of the instructors in this

study mused about how to get students to see this. Rita combined two analogies: that of the mirror and the out-of-body experience. Rita thinks the mirror analogy will help students be able to see themselves in the mirror (the “me”) and then, when they step out of their body, they can see their reflection from the point of view of another person (the “them”). In this stage, students are expected to look at their writing (“me”) in terms of their audience (“them”).

I see this metaphor as a spiral. Students begin the act of reflection in the private spaces of their minds, and then move outward from “my thoughts” to “your thoughts,” and then finally move to the outer edge of the spiral when they are able to think in terms of “their thoughts,” how other people view their writing.

### **Relying less on prescriptive assignments**

Another implication for writing teachers is that in order to get students to reflect, there must be less reliance on prescriptive, spoon-fed assignments. If students are presented with these types of assignments, the strong students will rebel and the weak students will default to recipe-following. Ellie wrestled with this idea when she commented that her philosophy of writing is “true genius lies in thinking within the box, not outside of the box.” This idea is particularly appropriate for this assessment. The students are given the goals and told to reflect on them (the box), and the readers are looking for true genius within that structure.

### **Considering competencies**

The beauty of this program assessment is that it requires a close examination of the course competencies (or class goals) by all writing faculty. In this study, several of the

instructors commented on the discrepancy between the existing Composition I competencies at [Darby] Community College and the assessment's focus on reflection. Their concern centers on the fact that as the assessment is currently designed, students are expected to reflect on the class goals (which are a reduction of the course competencies), but since reflection is not currently stated as a class goal, the reflective letter is asking students for something that they may not have been exposed to throughout the semester. In order to resolve this discrepancy, writing faculty will have to discuss the consequences of keeping the competencies the way they are or adding reflection as a course competency.

### **College administrators**

The last group of stakeholders who can benefit from this inquiry are college administrators. This study underscores the fact that, while quantitative data are necessary and helpful for assessment, qualitative data also have a place in assessment, and certainly in writing assessment. The quantitative data (Appendix A1 & A2) provided evidence of learning for external stakeholders, such as accreditation agencies, legislators, and the public, while the qualitative data developed by this study provided evidence of learning for internal stakeholders, such as students and teachers. The two types of data are complementary, and all stakeholders benefit from having access to both kinds. However, the most important finding of this study was that faculty valued the conversations afforded by their ability to reflect on their teaching process. This was evident from the comments of the instructors as well as the readers regarding using reflection in their own disciplines. Further evidence of these conversations came from Hannah, one of the instructors, who spent so much time reflecting

on the assessment process that she created a treatise (Appendix E1) that she shared with other writing faculty.

For college administrators, this finding translates into more in-service days that will enable faculty from within the same discipline to share ideas, concerns, and best practices. These conversations generate what Tagg (2003) called a hot cognitive economy where teaching and learning is valued.

Hannah summed up this idea with a wonderful analogy about the assessment process:

The assessment process is finding out about where our students are and how much they're learning; it is the pebble that is thrown into the pond. However, the ripple effect and the wave effect extending outward from the pebble's point of entry, these rings are what the English department is doing as a department, how we mesh together.

### **Recommendations**

The following recommendations are based on the findings of the study. They are geared toward those who teach writing, those who assess writing, and those who research writing assessment.

The findings suggested that teachers of writing should include reflection in their composition classrooms on a regular and continuous basis. Although students are at different cognitive ability levels, it is helpful to at least expose students to reflective thinking. According to Rita, this assessment with its reflective letter will not make students reflective practitioners or critical thinkers. However, it is a chipping away at the problem. At this point, we're looking for the "flicker in their eye."

For those charged with assessing writing, the findings of this study point to the fact that composition portfolios can be assessed reliably and cost-efficiently using White's (2005)

Phase 2 scoring process. However, it is recommended that future studies use electronic portfolios. Electronic portfolios will solve two problems. The first problem is that of storage; paper portfolios take up a great amount space. The second, and more important, problem is that of returning the portfolios to the students. In this assessment, since it is used as a summative assessment at the end of the semester, the students whose portfolios are randomly selected, turn them in at the end of the semester and, thus, do not get to keep their portfolios. In one of the many pilot tests, we tried to give the portfolios back to the instructors so that the students could pick them up during the next semester, but when we moved to a district-wide assessment, that became too cumbersome, and very few of the students ever came back for their portfolios. This created a storage issue for the instructors. Electronic portfolios would solve these two problems, however, they would, naturally, require some adjustments during the reading session.

For those people who are interested in researching writing assessment, there are three recommendations for future research based on this study. The first recommendation is to keep the assessment the same, but to measure the level of reflection in the letters. Many evaluation tools have been developed to analyze reflection (Fund, Court, & Kramarski, 2002; Kember et al., 2000) and, although much has been written about measuring reflection, most has been focused on measuring the responses in journals. This research would focus on measuring the reflection in letters when they are used as a summative assessment.

The second area of study is to examine the reflective maturity in the reflective letters of this assessment through the lens of student development theory. Researchers could examine the cognitive development of students using Perry's (1968) theory or King and Kitchener's (1994) reflective judgment model.



The third area of study is to change this study from a qualitative study to a quantitative study. This could be done by setting up a pre-test/post-test, control group design where the students are asked to write a reflective letter at the beginning of the semester, and then an intervention is staged in the non-control groups and, then, for the post-tests, students are again asked to write a reflective letter. The post-tests could be compared between groups to see if the intervention made a difference. The benefit gained from this approach is that researchers could identify whether specific teaching strategies help improve the quality of the reflection. The intervention that could be studied is Watson's (2000) on-going reflective letters to the instructor. Watson explained his process: "Our first letter exchange initiates a semester-length correspondence I carry on with each student. Virtually every writing assignment comes in two parts: the requested text and a letter to me accompanying that text" (p. 86). The students are asked to tell Watson as much as they can about their writing of the particular text and he responds personally to each letter, as well as to the assignment.

### **My Reflections**

This study was undertaken to add an element of context to a quantitative assessment. When the instructors in the English department at [Darby] Community College were asked to design a program assessment, they wanted it to be authentic and, thus, they chose a portfolio assessment with a reflective letter. However, once the first pilot study was completed and the quantitative data were analyzed, the results were discouraging. Since the graphs that were produced from the pilot study did not inform practice, I was frustrated as a composition teacher. I felt that there had to be a better way to see if the students were learning. A qualitative case study of the assessment process allowed the voices of the participants to be

heard. As a case researcher, I had recognized a “puzzlement” (Stake, 1995, p. 97) and studied it, hoping to find ways to connect it better with “known things” (p. 97).

Listening to the voices of the participants in this study verified what I knew, intuitively, to be true: that the assessment was a valid one. It was one that could inform practice and help students grow as writers.

Regarding the methodological concerns of being an insider, I did notice the concept of distance just one time. I was conducting content analysis on the reflective letters and I came across a student who said, “In this class, we were taught to focus on specifically writing just bad drafts and then constantly revising upon it (mainly using peer editing) then writing a finished product.” When I read this student’s signature, I was appalled to discover that he was one of my better students. How could he think that I wanted him to write bad drafts? What could have gone awry in my teaching methods? I pondered this for quite some time, and then worried that all the other students in my class left for winter break with the same erroneous impression. Suddenly, I realized that I had let Seidman’s (1998) concern with the problem of distance impair my vision. I let it go. I rationalized that this is a problem that goes with the territory; if we want to hear student voices, we may not get the full story. By this I mean that when we listen to student interviews or read their reflective letters, we have not been privy to that student’s motivations and life stories. As a result, students could assert that they were never taught the fundamentals of MLA documentation when, in fact, they simply chose not to attend class on those days.

This leads into one of the other methodological problems I encountered. I interviewed three students from each of the three instructors because I wanted to verify that what they said happened in the classroom really happened. I was hoping to be able to see evidence of

Yancey's (1998) and Ewell's (1997) ideas of the experienced curriculum versus the delivered curriculum at work. Alas, it was not to be. The students offered little in the way of classroom experiences and, while I was hoping to connect the student responses to the response of their instructors, the students simply became students.

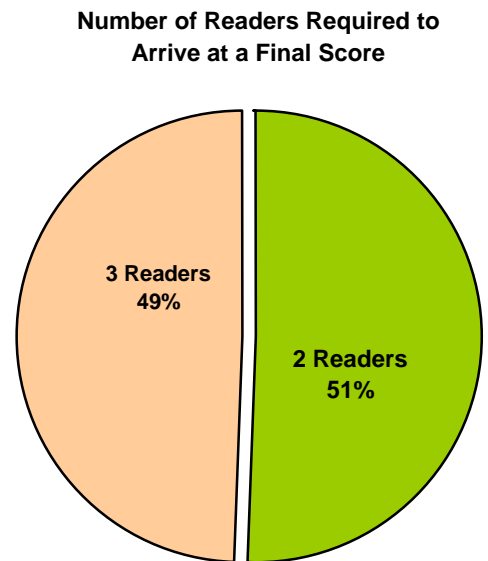
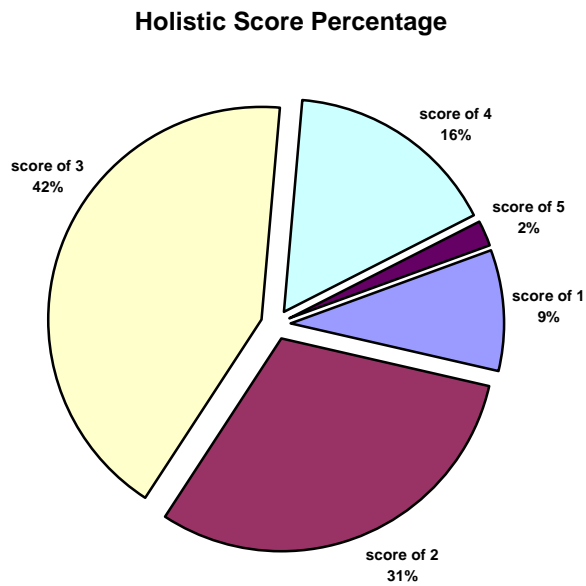
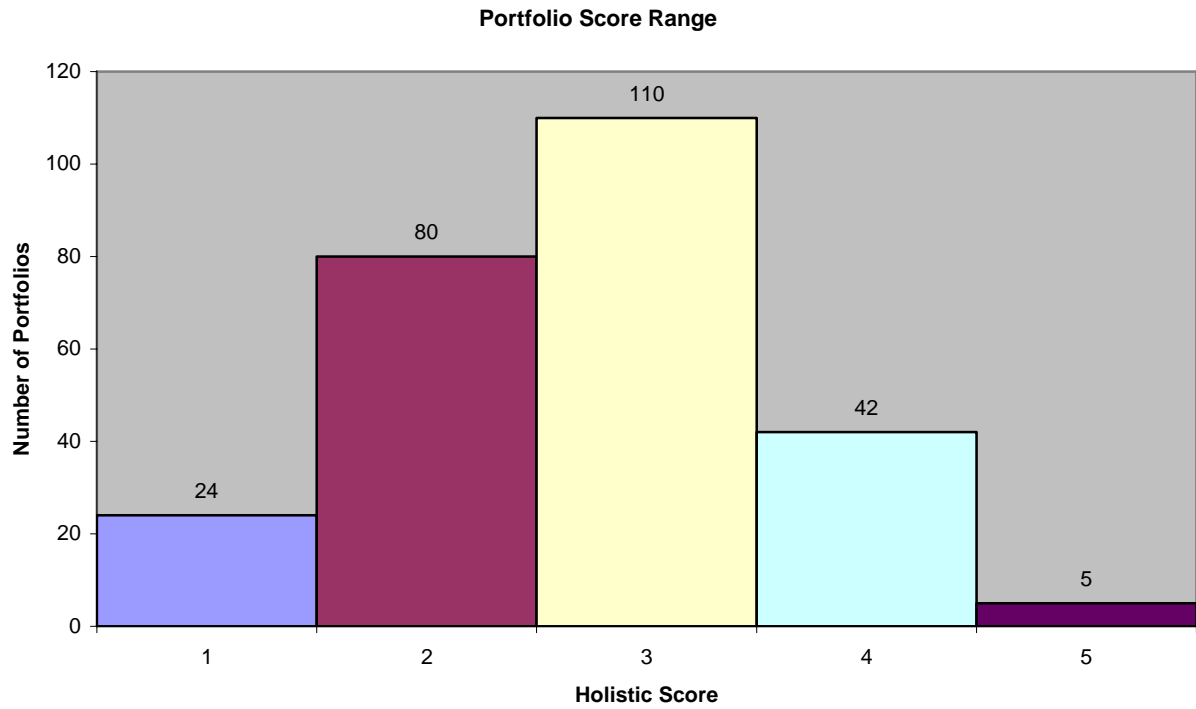
Another element of this study that I noticed as I read the reflective letters is the window I had into some teachers' classrooms. Many of the students mentioned the same assignments as having great meaning in their lives, and I wondered if there was a way, short of reading all the letters from every assessment, to capture these ideas. I thought that, perhaps, a better way would be to ask the instructors to reflect on their best practices and share these with other English instructors during an in-service meeting.

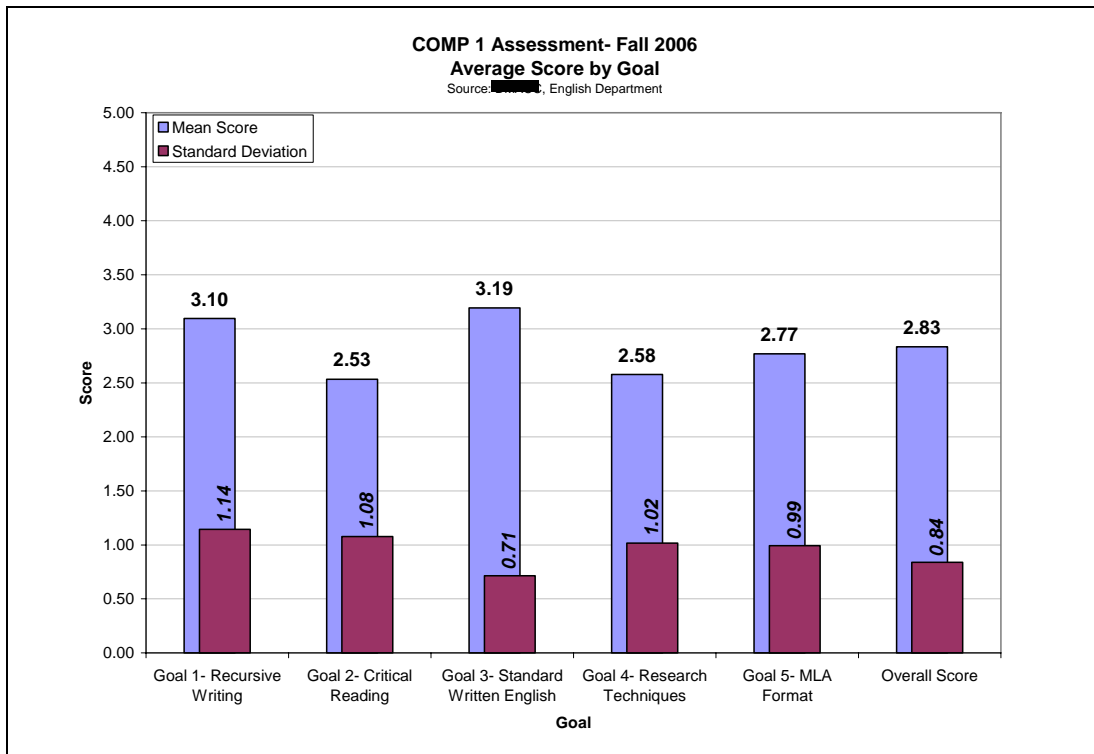
As a result of this writing assessment study, the English department at [Darby] is planning its first-ever, district-wide retreat for September 2007. On this day, all of the English classes will be cancelled, and all faculty (full-time and part-time) will be invited to attend a day-long retreat at a local country club to review the findings of this assessment and form a committee to begin a re-evaluation of the competencies.

In 2001, the English department was looking for a way to assess the writing ability of their students. Now, six years and many false starts later, we feel we might have found an assessment that will work for us. What we like about this assessment is that it operates on four levels. First, assessment enables the students to take responsibility for their writing. This is done by using a portfolio and the reflective letter that asks the students to reflect on how they met the goals of the course. Second, it enables the instructors the opportunity to reflect on their teaching within the class. At this time, this is not a required part of the assessment, but it usually happens as a result of reading the reflective letters. Third, it allows the readers

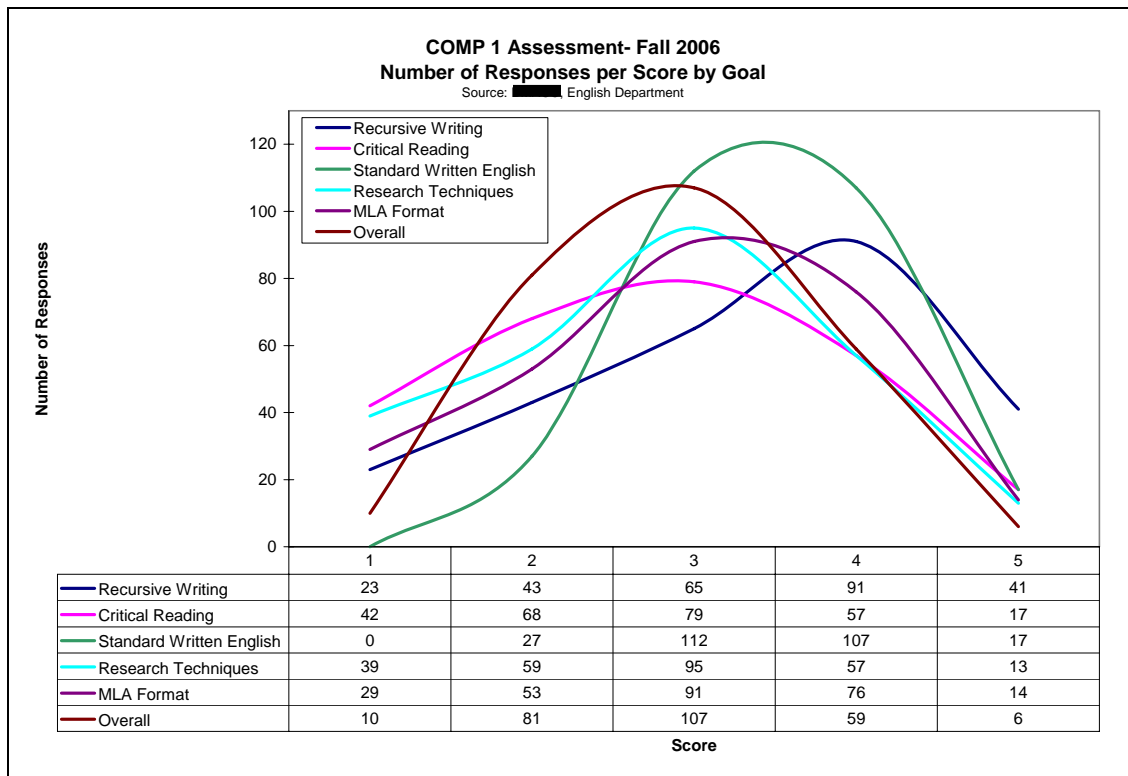
the opportunity to reflect on how they use reflection in their classes, and it helps them to align their expectations with those of the English department. Finally, assessment enables the college to collect the kind of quantitative data they need in order to comply with the requests from external stakeholders.

This reflective assessment opens up conversations among the students, between the students and their instructors, among the instructors, and between the instructors and the college administrators. The students converse among themselves as peer editors. Then the instructors and students converse with each other through the students' writing. The instructors also converse with each other about best practices and ways to help students achieve the goals of the class. Ultimately, the instructors, who are the designers and facilitators of this assessment, converse with the college administrators about their students' learning. Through reflection, this assessment makes what was once private, public.

**APPENDIX A. COMPOSITION I****A1 – Comp I Pilot Assessment Results Spring 2006**



## A2 – Comp I Pilot Assessment Results Fall 2006



## **APPENDIX B. INTERVIEW PROTOCOL**

### **B1. Holistic Scoring Guide**

Categories are listed below:

1. Demonstrated fundamental deficiencies in writing skills. An essay in this category contains serious and persistent writing errors or is so underdeveloped as to be practically incoherent.
2. Demonstrates minimal competence and is seriously flawed. An essay in this category exhibits several of the following traits:
  - weak organization and very little development
  - little or no relevant detail
  - serious errors in mechanics, usage, sentence structure or word choice
3. Demonstrates minimal competence, but is flawed. An essay in this category reveals one or more of the following traits:
  - exhibits basic organization or development
  - inadequate explanation or illustration of key ideas
  - a pattern or accumulation of errors in mechanics, usage, or sentence structure
  - limited or inappropriate word choice
4. Demonstrates clear competence. An essay in this category reveals one or more of the following traits:
  - is adequately organized and developed
  - explains or illustrates the key ideas
  - demonstrates adequate facility with language
  - may display some errors in mechanics, usage, or sentence structure, but not a consistent pattern of such errors
5. Demonstrates a high degree of competence. An essay in this category reveals one or more of the following traits:
  - is well organized and developed
  - explains or illustrates key ideas
  - demonstrates syntactic variety
  - is almost wholly free from errors in mechanics, usage, and sentence structure

### **B2 – E-mail and Telephone Scripts for Participants**

#### **E-mail Scripts for Students**

You have been recommended by your English instructor, \_\_\_\_\_, as a student who may be interested in volunteering to participate in a research study. I am a doctoral student in the Educational Leadership and Policy Studies department at Iowa State University, and the purpose of my study is to understand the role reflection plays in the learning of writing.

If you agree to participate in this study, your participation will last for approximately one hour. In a focus group with other students, you will be asked questions about reflection and writing. You will be compensated for participating in this study. A token payment of \$20.00 will be made at the conclusion of the focus group. If you decide to participate in this study, you may leave the study at any time.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you are interested in participating, please reply to this invitation so that we may set up a mutually agreed-upon time to meet to discuss the study in more detail.

Thank you.

### **Telephone Scripts for Students**

You have been recommended by your English instructor, \_\_\_\_\_, as a student who may be interested in volunteering to participate in a research study. I am a doctoral student in the Educational Leadership and Policy Studies department at Iowa State University, and the purpose of my study is to understand the role reflection plays in the learning of writing.

If you agree to participate in this study, your participation will last for approximately one hour. In a focus group with other students, you will be asked questions about reflection and writing. You will be compensated for participating in this study. A token payment of \$20.00 will be made at the conclusion of the focus group. If you decide to participate in this study, you may leave the study at any time.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you are interested in participating, may we set up a time to meet to discuss the study in more detail?

Thank you.

### **E-mail Scripts for Readers**

You are being invited to participate in this research study because you are a trained reader for the English department's portfolio assessment at [Darby] Community College. I am a doctoral student in the Educational Leadership and Policy Studies department at Iowa State University, and the purpose of my study is to understand the role reflection plays in the evaluation of writing.

If you agree to participate in this study, your participation will last for approximately three 60-90 minute interviews. You will be compensated for participating in this study. A token payment of \$20.00 per hour will be made at the conclusion of the each interview. If you decide to participate in this study, you may leave the study at any time.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you are interested in participating, please reply to this invitation so that we may set up a mutually agreed-upon time to meet to discuss the study in more detail.

Thank you.

### **Telephone Scripts for Readers**

You are being invited to participate in this research study because you are a trained reader for the English department's portfolio assessment at [Darby] Community College. I am a doctoral student in the Educational Leadership and Policy Studies department at Iowa State University, and the purpose of my study is to understand the role reflection plays in the evaluation of writing.

If you agree to participate in this study, your participation will last for approximately three 60-90 minute interviews. You will be compensated for participating in this study. A token payment of \$20.00 per hour will be made at the conclusion of the each interview. If you decide to participate in this study, you may leave the study at any time.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you are interested in participating, may we set up a time to meet to discuss the study in more detail?

Thank you.

### **E-mail Scripts for Instructors**

You are being invited to participate in this research study because you are a Composition I instructor at [Darby] Community College during the Fall 2006 semester. I am a doctoral student in the Educational Leadership and Policy Studies department at Iowa State University, and the purpose of my study is to understand the role reflection plays in the teaching of writing.

If you agree to participate in this study, your participation will last for three 60-90 minute interviews. You will be compensated for participating in this study. A token payment of \$20.00 per hour will be made at the conclusion of each interview. If you decide to participate in this study, you may leave the study at any time.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you are interested in participating, please reply to this invitation so that we may set up a mutually agreed-upon time to meet to discuss the study in more detail.

Thank you.



### **Telephone Scripts for Instructors**

You are being invited to participate in this research study because you are a Composition I instructor at [Darby] Community College during the Fall 2006 semester. I am a doctoral student in the Educational Leadership and Policy Studies department at Iowa State University, and the purpose of my study is to understand the role reflection plays in the teaching of writing.

If you agree to participate in this study, your participation will last for three 60-90 minute interviews. You will be compensated for participating in this study. A token payment of \$20.00 per hour will be made at the conclusion of each interview. If you decide to participate in this study, you may leave the study at any time.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you are interested in participating, may we set up a mutually agreed-upon time to meet to discuss the study in more detail?

Thank you.

### **B3 – Interview Protocol for Instructors**

#### **Interview #1 (Background Information)**

#### **Project: Assessing Writing through Reflection**

Time of interview:

Date:

Place:

Interviewer:

Interviewee:

Position of interviewee:

The purpose of this study is to seek to understand the nature of reflection in writing assessment. The experiences of first-year composition students, first-year composition instructors, and trained portfolio readers who participated in a new, holistically-scored portfolio course evaluation program at a Midwestern community college will be explored.

Questions:

1. What is your academic background?
2. What is your background as an instructor?
3. How do you understand reflection?
4. How do you understand reflection in writing?
5. How did you incorporate reflection into your composition course this semester?

(Thank you for participating in this interview. I will be using a pseudonym for you in the transcript and sending you a copy of my summary so you can check it for accuracy.)

**Interview #2 (Details of the Experience)****Project: Assessing Writing through Reflection**

Time of interview:

Date:

Place:

Interviewer:

Interviewee:

Position of interviewee:

The purpose of this study is to seek to understand the nature of reflection in writing assessment. The experiences of first-year composition students, first-year composition instructors, and trained portfolio readers who participated in a new, holistically-scored portfolio course evaluation program at a Midwestern community college will be explored.

Questions:

1. Tell me how you included reflection in your composition class.
2. What was it like for you as an instructor to include reflection in your course?
3. Can you tell me a story about one of your reflection assignments?

(Thank you for participating in this interview. I will be using a pseudonym for you in the transcript and sending you a copy of my summary so you can check it for accuracy.)

**Interview #3 (Making Meaning of the Experience)****Project: Assessing Writing through Reflection**

Time of interview:

Date:

Place:

Interviewer:

Interviewee:

Position of interviewee:

The purpose of this study is to seek to understand the nature of reflection in writing assessment. The experiences of first-year composition instructors, first-year composition students, and trained portfolio readers who participated in a new, holistically-scored portfolio course evaluation program at a Midwestern community college will be explored.

Questions:

1. What does it mean to be a composition instructor charged with teaching reflection?
2. Given what you have said in Interviews #1 and #2, how do you make sense of your work as a instructor teaching reflection?

(Thank you for participating in this interview. I will be using a pseudonym for you in the transcript and sending you a copy of my summary so you can check it for accuracy.)

## **B4 – Interview Protocol for Students**

### **Interview (Background Information)**

#### **Project: Assessing Writing through Assessment**

Time of interview:

Date:

Place:

Interviewer:

Interviewee:

Position of interviewee:

The purpose of this study is to seek to understand the nature of reflection in writing assessment. The experiences of first-year composition instructors, first-year composition students, and trained portfolio readers who participated in a new, holistically-scored portfolio course evaluation program at a Midwestern community college will be explored.

Questions:

1. What is your background as a student?
2. What is your background in writing?
3. How do you understand reflection?
4. How do you understand reflection in writing?
5. How did you use reflection in your composition course this semester?

(Thank you for participating in this interview. I will be using a pseudonym for you in the transcript and sending you a copy of my summary so you can check it for accuracy.)

## **B5 – Interview Protocol for Readers**

### **Interview #1 (Background Information)**

#### **Project: Assessing Writing through Assessment**

Time of interview:

Date:

Place:

Interviewer:

Interviewee:

Position of interviewee:

The purpose of this study is to seek to understand the nature of reflection in writing assessment. The experiences of first-year composition instructors, first-year composition students, and trained portfolio readers who participated in a new, holistically-scored portfolio course evaluation program at a Midwestern community college will be explored.

Questions:

1. What is your academic background?
2. What is your background as an instructor?
3. How do you understand reflection?
4. How do you understand reflection in writing?
5. How did you recognize reflection when reading the reflective letter?

(Thank you for participating in this interview. I will be using a pseudonym for you in the transcript and sending you a copy of my summary so you can check it for accuracy.)

**Interview #2 (Details of the Experience)**  
**Project: Assessing Writing through Assessment**

Time of interview:

Date:

Place:

Interviewer:

Interviewee:

Position of interviewee:

The purpose of this study is to seek to understand the nature of reflection in writing assessment. The experiences of first-year composition instructors, first-year composition students, and trained portfolio readers who participated in a new, holistically-scored portfolio course evaluation program at a Midwestern community college will be explored.

Questions:

1. Tell me about your training to become a reader.
2. What was it like to read the reflective letters and portfolios?
3. Can you tell me a story about your experience as a reader?

(Thank you for participating in this interview. I will be using a pseudonym for you in the transcript and sending you a copy of my summary so you can check it for accuracy.)

**Interview #3 (Making Meaning of the Experience)**  
**Project: Assessing Writing through Assessment**

Time of interview:

Date:

Place:

Interviewer:

Interviewee:

Position of interviewee:

The purpose of this study is to seek to understand the nature of reflection in writing assessment. The experiences of first-year composition instructors, first-year composition students, and trained portfolio readers who participated in a new, holistically-scored portfolio course evaluation program at a Midwestern community college will be explored.

Questions:

1. What does it mean to be a reader charged with evaluating reflective writing?
2. Given what you have said in Interviews #1 and #2, how do you make sense of your work as a reader?

(Thank you for participating in this interview. I will be using a pseudonym for you in the transcript and sending you a copy of my summary so you can check it for accuracy.)

**B6 – Research Study Questionnaire**

**Name:**

**Date of Interview:**

**Preferred e-mail address:**

**Mailing address:**

**Phone**

**Home:**

**Cell:**

**B7 – Assessment Scoring Rubric**

R a n k	Goals				
	1	2	3	4	5
	Demonstrate writing as a recursive process	Demonstrate critical reading strategies	Demonstrate application of conventions of standard written English	Demonstrate effective use of research techniques	Demonstrate MLA documentation, (including page layout, in-text citations, and a Works Cited page)
1	No reference to or understanding of writing as a recursive process	No mention or little understanding of reading as an active process	Unreadable; no apparent use of spell check; rife with errors; incoherent	Little to no mention of research techniques	Completely absent
2	Mentions skills but does not provide evidence or support	Mentions active reading skill but does not provide support	Use of spell check; minimal competence; serious errors	Mentions skill but provides no support	Mentions skill but no understanding of it; no evidence of MLA in letter or portfolio
3	Demonstrates basic understanding but doesn't provide support; can't relate to anything done in class	Mentions active reading strategies and provides minimal support	Basic grasp of conventions; occasional errors; limited word choice	Mentions skill and describes basic application of it	MLA used but flawed; citations are general in scope (e.g. "see pages 2-7")
4	Understands skill and provides adequate support	Demonstrates clear understanding of active reading strategies and provides evidence	Few errors; adequate facility with language	Analyzes skill and application of it	Mostly correct with specific citations (e.g. "see page 6")
5	Connects skill and examples with writing as process	Demonstrates clear understanding of skill and provides analysis of skill and strong examples	Almost wholly free of errors; syntactic variety	Analysis of skill and application goes beyond basics (e.g. choosing between types of sources)	Demonstrates clear understanding of MLA; application is flawless

## APPENDIX C. ENGLISH 117

### C1 – Course Competencies

#### Community College

#### COURSE INFORMATION

Acronym/Number Title	ENGL 117				
	COMPOSITION I				
Credit Breakout	3	3	0	0	0
	(credit	Lecture	Lab	Practicum	work experience)

#### PREREQUISITE(S):

ENGL 091 or satisfactory writing skills.

#### COURSE DESCRIPTION:

This course introduces students to college writing; students will construct and revise a series of writings; primarily expository but not excluding persuasive. Students will practice effective reading and research techniques that may include library and computer-based research skills.

#### COURSE COMPETENCIES:

*During this course, the student will be expected to:*

1. Practice writing as a recursive process.
  - 1.1 Explore invention activities, such as brainstorming, listing, and freewriting.
  - 1.2 Identify audience and purpose.
  - 1.3 Organize material, using thesis statement, supporting details and transitional devices.
  - 1.4 Revise for clarity, unity, and coherence.
  - 1.5 Practice writing as an active, recursive process using a computer (as facility allows).
2. Practice reading as an active part of the writing process.
  - 2.1 Use effective reading techniques such as rereading, annotating, and summarizing.
  - 2.2 Differentiate between main and supporting ideas.
  - 2.3 Distinguish between objective and subjective material.
  - 2.4 Understand connotation and denotation.
  - 2.5 Demonstrate sensitivity to discriminatory language.
  - 2.6 Analyze the content, expression, and context of the writing.
  - 2.7 Adapt material for specific writing purposes.
3. Adapt the rules of standard English grammar.
  - 3.1 Practice standard rules of punctuation and mechanics.
  - 3.2 Practice constructing syntactically sound sentences.
4. Investigate research resources where/when available.
  - 4.1 Tour a library.
  - 4.2 Use a librarian for research assistance.
  - 4.3 Use an on-line catalog.
  - 4.4 Practice searching the stacks for topical information.
  - 4.5 Identify common research vehicles on the Internet.
  - 4.6 Practice accessing sites.
  - 4.7 Begin to distinguish legitimate Internet material from less valid material.
  - 4.8 Practice retrieving relevant information.
5. Recognize standard documentation form.
  - 1.1 Understand the MLA definition of plagiarism.
  - 1.2 Identify reasons for documentation.
  - 1.3 Distinguish between personal ideas and outside sources.
  - 1.4 Practice rewriting source material in own words.
  - 1.5 Practice quoting primary texts accurately.
  - 1.6 Practice integrating outside sources effectively within the context of the student paper.
  - 1.7 Practice MLA formatting style.

**ENGL 117****INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS:**

**Textbooks:** For each text used in this course, identify the minimum chapters to be covered in this course.

Texts recommended by 1997 textbook committee:

Identities: Reading from Contemporary Cultures (blind text)

A Sense of Value

Reading Critically, Writing Well

The St. Martin's Guide to Writing

Rereading America

Keys for Writers (handbook)

Skunk River Review

**Study guide****Transparencies****Test banks****Computer hardware/software**

Norton Textra Connect

**Other (example: Laboratory equipment for biology/chemistry class)**

Date	<u>1/99</u>				
by:					
Campus:	A	<u>B</u>	C	U	OC
Extension					

Verified by:

Competencies are reviewed on an annual basis.

**C2 – Course Goals**

- Demonstrate effective writing as a recursive process.
- Demonstrate critical reading strategies.
- Demonstrate the application of the conventions of standard written English.
- Demonstrate the effective use of research techniques.
- Demonstrate the effective use of Modern Language Association (MLA) format, including page layout, in-text citations, and a Works Cited page.



### **C3 – Instructor Information Packet**

#### **Fall ENG 105 Comp 1 District Wide Assessment Pilot Project (Formerly ENGL 117)**

To: [ ] District Chair of Communications

Date: August 7, 2006

RE: Fall Comp 1 Assessment Information

#### **(If you are not teaching Comp 1 this fall, the following is for your information only.)**

The district Comp 1 assessment project was undertaken as part of [ ] institutional accreditation process (AQIP). This fall, all Comp 1 instructors are requested to do the following:

1. Include the five Comp 1 goal statements on your course syllabus.
2. Require all students to keep all writing assignments in a portfolio.
3. Require a reflective letter assignment that will form the basis of the assessment.
4. If randomly selected, submit a particular student's letter and portfolio to [ ], the Assessment Coordinator, by the end of the semester.

If you have any additional questions or concerns, consult your campus Group Leader. The Group Leaders have been provided with the following:

- Sample reflective letter packets
- Best practices incorporating reflection into a comp classroom
- Comp 1 course competencies

Informational meetings (optional) for Comp 1 concerns/questions have been scheduled for the following times:

1. August 24<sup>th</sup> at 3:00pm in room 2-25B
2. August 25<sup>th</sup> following the [ ] Sciences and Humanities meeting. (11:15am) in Room 2-25B

I wish you all a successful fall semester.

Three enclosures

#### **Composition I Course Goals**

1. Demonstrate writing as a recursive process
2. Demonstrate critical reading strategies
3. Demonstrate the application of the conventions of the standard written English
4. Demonstrate the effective use of research techniques
5. Demonstrate the proper use of Modern Language Association (MLA) format, including page layout, in-text citation, and a Works Cited page

#### **Composition I Portfolio Checklist for Students**

- \_\_\_\_\_ Use a small, paper folder with center clasps and side pockets to contain your materials. If necessary, use two folders and label them Volume 1 and Volume 2 with your name.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Your reflective letter must be typed, single-spaced, use block format, and inserted in the front of the folder.
- \_\_\_\_\_ All reflective letters must use the portfolio material as evidence for learning.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Number all portfolio pages consecutively in the lower right corner of each portfolio page (numbers can be handwritten)
- \_\_\_\_\_ Address the letter to "Dear Reader"; for the inside address, use the address on the full block format handout

### Portfolio Reader Reflections

At our most recent portfolio reading, we asked our readers to reflect briefly on what they were reading. Specifically, we asked them about their likes and dislikes about the letters and portfolios.

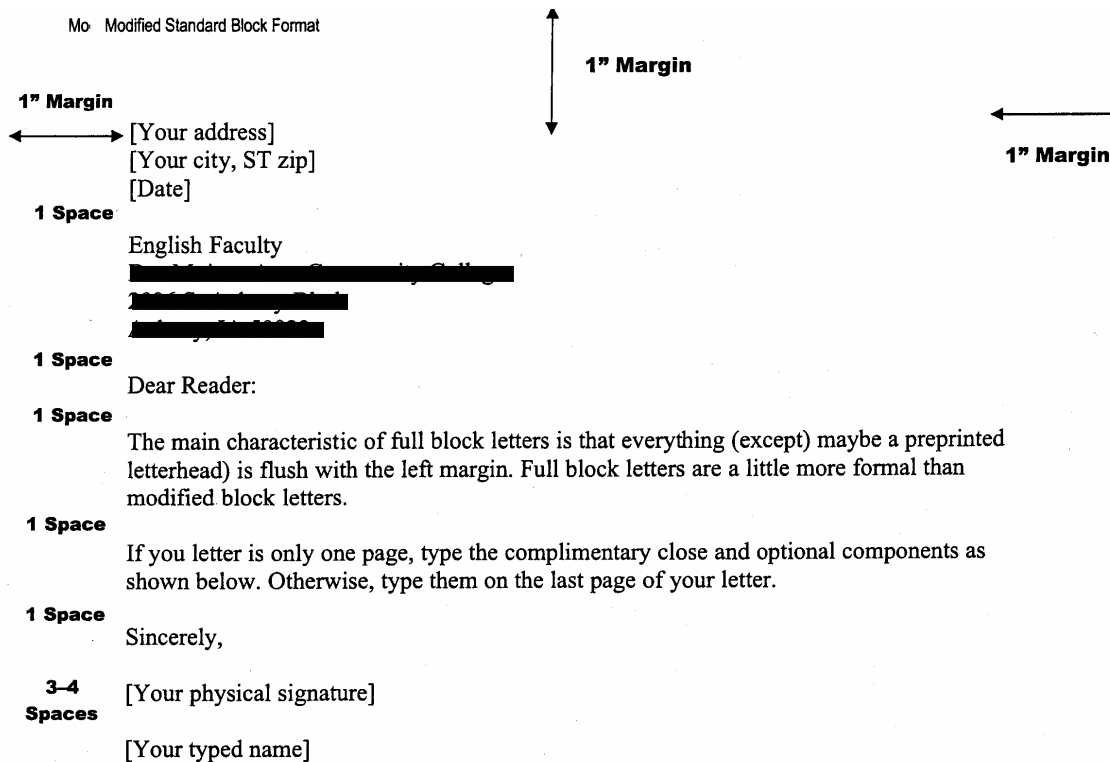
#### Preferences:

- Demonstrated personality in the letters
- Demonstrated insight and understand into the purpose of the letter; specific comments focused on "what did I get" and "what do I need to work on?"
- Following the given letter format, including margins and signature block

#### Criticisms:

- Any teacher markings or grades on the reflective letter
- References to grades or using the letter to argue for a specific final grade
- Using the letter to "rag" on or complain about the instructor
- An arrogant tone
- A "suck up" tone
- Exclamations like "Wow" or "Duh"
- Excessive use of the exclamation point

### Full Block Format



**(FAQs) – Frequently-Asked Questions**

1. **How should the portfolio be organized?**  
It doesn't matter; some instructors prefer newest to oldest with drafts before the final, while others prefer the opposite. All that matters is that *each page* be numbered consecutively in the lower right corner and that students refer to the page numbers in their in-text citations.
2. **Do students need to keep all of their work?**  
Yes. You will need to remind them of this throughout the semester.
3. **What if they don't keep all of their work?**  
Their pool of evidence for their reflective letter becomes very small.
4. **Should students include all of the material that they've produced during the semester?**  
Yes. By doing so, it gives the students more material upon which to reflect. If student just select their "best" work, it will be hard to prove that they've met the goal of practicing recursive writing. This is a learning portfolio, not a professional portfolio.
5. **Do all the portfolios need a reflective letter?**  
Yes. The reflective letter is what the readers read for the assessment.
6. **What weight must we assign to the reflective letter and portfolio?**  
It's your choice. Most of the pilot instructors use the reflective letter as their final exam. You just need to assign enough weight to this project so the students will take it seriously.
7. **Do raters only read the letter?**  
Yes. However, since the portfolio is included with the letter, readers have the opportunity to verify the students' claims by referenced by page numbers.
8. **What is the reflective letter assignment?**  
A departmental assignment doesn't exist. We just ask that the students a) write one, b) address the course goals in their letter, c) use in-text citations of page numbers that refer to their work product, and d) address the letter to "Dear Reader" instead of to the faculty member.
9. **Can students receive help on their letters in the AAC?**  
Yes. This would show the recursive process.
10. **Do we need additional reflective assignments?**  
Yes. We have found that the ability to reflect on one's work is a higher order skill, and students can't just be hit with it at the end of the semester. Each campus Group Leader has a packet of ideas and best practices from our pilot instructors.
11. **If I teach in a computer lab, will the students be required to print everything out?**  
Yes. For this assessment, we are only reading paper portfolios. However, several instructors are experimenting with electronic portfolios and we may be able to include these in future assessments.
12. **As I understand it, all Comp I students are to complete a portfolio and reflective letter, but only a few will be collected for the assessment sample. Is this correct?**  
Yes. If a student of yours has been selected for the random sample, you will receive notification about two weeks prior to the end of the semester.
13. **If a student's portfolio is requested, will it be returned to the student?**  
No. The student may elect to make a copy of the portfolio and give us either the original or the copy.
14. **I teach APA. Should I switch to MLA?**  
Yes. The competencies require us to teach MLA. However, you may teach APA (or other formats) in addition to MLA.
15. **Do I have to teach research in Comp I?**  
Yes. In order for students to meet the fourth course goal, demonstrate the effective use of research techniques, you must give them something for their portfolio.
16. **Which classes are involved in this assessment?**  
All fall Comp I classes, district-wide, *except* dual credit courses (high school) and on-line courses. These will be added at a later date.
17. **Should the reflective letter be an in-class assignment?**  
No. We specifically ask that you give the students at least a week to compose their letters.
18. **Should the Comp I goal statements be included in my syllabus?**  
Yes. The reflective letter is tied to the goal statements. You may choose to include the course competencies in your syllabus, or you may choose to just include the goal statements.
19. **What does recursive mean?**  
According to the Texas Education Agency, recursive writing is the "moving back and forth among the planning, drafting and revising phases of writing."

## APPENDIX D. HUMAN SUBJECTS APPROVAL

### IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Institutional Review Board  
Office of Research Assurances  
Vice Provost for Research  
1138 Pearson Hall  
Ames, Iowa 50011-2207  
515 294-4566  
FAX 515 294-4267

**DATE:** 7 November 2006

**TO:** Eden Pearson  
2331 290<sup>th</sup> Street, Peru IA 50222

**CC:** Dr. Nancy Evans  
N247D Lagomarcino

**FROM:** Jan Canny, IRB Administrator  
Office of Research Assurances

**SUBJECT:** IRB ID 06-537

**Approval Date:** 3 November 2006  
**Date for Continuing Review:** 2 November 2007

The Co-Chair of the Institutional Review Board of Iowa State University has reviewed and approved the protocol entitled: "Assessing writing through reflection: A qualitative inquiry." The protocol has been assigned the following ID Number: 06-537. Please refer to this number in all correspondence regarding the protocol.

Your study has been approved from 3 November 2006 to 2 November 2007. The **continuing review date** for this study is no later than 2 November 2007. Federal regulations require continuing review of ongoing projects. Please submit the form with sufficient time (i.e. three to four weeks) for the IRB to review and approve continuation of the study, prior to the continuing review date.

Failure to complete and submit the continuing review form will result in expiration of IRB approval on the continuing review date and the file will be administratively closed. All research related activities involving the participants **must stop** on the continuing review date, until approval can be re-established, except when necessary to eliminate immediate hazard to research participants. As a courtesy to you, we will send a reminder of the approaching review prior to this date.

Please remember that any **changes in the protocol or consent form** may not be implemented without prior IRB review and approval, using the "Continuing Review and/or Modification" form. Research investigators are expected to comply with the principles of the Belmont Report, and state and federal regulations regarding the involvement of humans in research. These documents are located on the Office of Research Assurances website or available by calling (515) 294-4566, [www.compliance.iastate.edu](http://www.compliance.iastate.edu).

You must promptly report any of the following to the IRB: (1) **all serious and/or unexpected adverse experiences** involving risks to subjects or others; and (2) **any other unanticipated problems involving risks** to subjects or others.

Upon completion of the project, please submit a Project Closure Form to the Office of Research Assurances. 1138 Pearson Hall. to officially close the project.

## APPENDIX E. REFLECTIONS

### E1 – Hannah’s Treatise

There has to be alignment between one’s philosophical approach to writing and one’s approach to reflection in writing.

In other words, if you want students to view reflection as inherently rhetorical, that is predicated on being conscious of the choices that one makes in terms of audience and purpose while drafting and revising, then your approach to teaching composition needs to focus on rhetorical choice rather than composition as learning to execute different types of structure (the basic premise of St. Martin’s Guide to Writing and Reading Critically, Writing Well).

If one uses a highly prescriptive book like St. Martins and only focuses on the prescriptions for how the different types of papers are to be written without considering audience and purpose, one is using what I would call a structuralist approach, rather than a rhetorical approach. That isn’t to say that St. Martin’s doesn’t present the concepts of audience and purpose. It’s just that the focus is on the features of each type of paper basically presenting an outline of each type of paper with the most emphasis being placed on structure of the paper and minimal emphasis on rhetorical choice.

Here is an example of structuralist reflection:

1. How well did I follow the organizational structure for a particular kind of essay as presented in St. Martins:
2. How clear is my thesis statement?
3. How well organized is my paper?

Here is an example of questions based on rhetorical reflection:

1. Why choose this particular type of paper to write and how effective is this choice for this particular purpose and audience?
2. Why choose this particular content and how effective is this choice of content for this particular purpose and audience?
3. Why choose these particular rhetorical strategies and how effective are these rhetorical strategies for this particular purpose and audience?

That being said – I will now identify the second major problem in using reflection as an assessment tool for the DMACC English Department. For reflection to be an accurate and effective assessment tool, there has to be alignment between how the concept of reflection is interpreted (i.e., conscious awareness of the choices one is making in the conceptualizing, drafting, and revision process of writing) with the view of writing as rhetorical choice based on one’s audience and purpose.)

Our department does not have unanimity in our approach to writing. As far as I can tell, there are three basic approaches out there: structuralist, rhetorical, and epistemic. So, as far as I can see, we won’t be able to have alignment of our assessment reflection to our approaches to writing since our approaches to writing are different.

Further, the philosophical differences in approaches to writing make generating meaningful competencies difficult. I am not, by any means, advocating that we all have the same philosophical approach to writing. I’m just saying that when we try to accommodate all of these approaches in the competencies, then our competencies become, in my opinion, pretty general and vague.

And, finally, writing this treatise has now helped me realize that my suggestion of assessing one particular kind of paper (based on negotiated ideas of which kind of paper and the conventions of the paper) is really no better than assessing on reflection due to the same problem. Whatever kind of paper is chosen and what goes into the paper is going to be based on one particular approach to writing (rhetorical, epistemic, or structuralist). The only way that meaningful assessment of a piece of writing will work is if teachers were consciously aware of and employed the approach to writing that had been negotiated and agreed upon and the assessment instrument was aligned with this philosophical approach to writing.

Thanks for listening.

## E2 – Student Letter

December 13, 2006

Dear Reader"

First I should say, one of the criticisms is an arrogant tone. I will then begin with this: my writing style requires arrogance, cynicism, and downright bluntness. To write well, you need a tone of some kind. That is my tone, and my style, and is what makes my writing enjoyable. Kind of like David Sedaris. A few more things, my writing voice is informal unless I have been informed I must present neatly. Since this is a personal letter, I will be as informal and arrogant as I bloody well want to.

Writing as a recursive process. Hmmm. Pretty sure that is a very unclear way of putting it, and I bet 99% of people will ask, "What does that mean?" Lucky for me, I already asked. The recursive process is writing and re-writing. Making a rough draft and polishing it up, or starting a draft, and then adding on to it later. One of my best examples would be my 9/11 paper.

My 9/11 paper started with nothing more than photo illustration description from a picture in Time. I then began with a rough, mostly emotional and opinionated approach (like I do with all my papers first). Then I found a resource to back up my opinions and included it in my paper. During the draft stage I often insert questions for myself as I go, so I don't have to stop writing at any time to consider anything. I write and write, and if there is conflict with What I say that I catch right away, I'll note it and move on. A good example of one of these questions is in my 9/11 paper, where I ask myself how I would explain my photo illustration example (17). There is another example that shows a note written to myself to include my source of support at a certain point (18).

Critical reading strategies. Well, if it is what I think it is... No, I'm not quite sure what is meant by strategies for critical reading. When it comes to reading informational works for me, I usually just read through once and move on. Most of the time, I don't have to pick a piece of writing apart to understand it. Now if this means highlighting and noting main points, I have examples of highlights from our Time magazine. In this case, I know strategies for critical reading, but I don't necessarily highlight entries, I just make mental notes while I am reading. My examples of highlights are about the new candidate for presidency, Obama (26-27).

Conventions of standard written English. In layman's terms: punctuation and grammar. Oh how I love the attempts made by you higher ups to appear sophisticated through use of extensive vocabulary. I'm not saying it's wrong, just that I find it a source of amusement. Anyways, I'm pretty sure I suck when it comes to the technical aspect of writing, but hey, that's what editors are for, right? The "recursive process" mentioned above is just about the only method I use to tackle my technical problems. I can be technical myself sure, but my writing has a hard time with it. I add emphasis to this with the idea that I write how I think, almost literally the words that go through my mind. This means many commas. Many, many, many, many commas (I'm sure you get the point). So yes, technical rules are something I need to work on, but I won't let it hinder my succulent writing style. Oh yea, an example. Well you can see our teacher did take time to hammer it into our skulls. She gave us a few short writing assignments that required technical practice, semicolons being one of them (25)

Yes, I know, I am just going down the list, I'm sorry. I have a writer's block right now, it's just so difficult to keep things interesting, and so I will do my best to cut your misery short, dear reader. Keep going, we are almost done, thought I am sure I'm saying the more for me than for you, considering you are just reading this, while I am the one writing it. Let's move on.

Research techniques. Doesn't that fall along the lines of critical reading? I'm pretty damn sure it does. Along with critical reading, though, you have to be sure you are citing your sources, which is the next 'goal.' How great is that, let's take two gators with one bullet. I know its two birds with one stone, but that is so cliché. I wanted to say something different, because everyone knows there is more than one way to skin a cat. Getting of course...sorry. Research is something I didn't tackle well in this class, because while everyone else was doing their research for the class, I was behind and doing research for another class. It was one of those choices I had to make, but I do have an example of in-text citation (55).

I believe that about covers the requirements. Now it's my turn to say exactly what I want, though I am sure now is about the time you could stop reading, just like I could stop writing. But I wont.

With every writing class I take, I am reminded of the difference in people, from my teachers to my peers. Everyone has their own style and their own reason for writing. For some, it's only because they have to. For others, like me, we write because we want to express ourselves. But what is the value of expression when still hindered by doubt. We may have a freedom of speech here in America, but that doesn't mean we can say whatever we want, because if you don't have the courage to say *exactly* what you want to say, then your words loose their value, and aren't worth anyone's time. Tiptoeing around what you really want to say is like tiptoeing through life to arrive safely at death's door. What was the point?

Well I have had and said my piece, and taken enough of your time. As this is a letter I would feel wrong not to write parting words. Thank you for taking the time to read my words, and I hope you have a safe, enjoyable Christmas. Don't be afraid to be yourself, and I would go on, but instead, read my introductory letter, and you many understand me better when I say hold nothing back (1-2).

Sincerely,

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